

FORCES

2026



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Since Dr. Peggy Brown printed the first issue of *FORCES* in 1989, Collin College's premier arts and literary magazine has strived to showcase the best student, staff, and community art within its pages. Not long after its inception, Professor Scott Yarbrough took the helm of the journal and transformed it into the excellent publication it is today. His tireless efforts to bring the Collin College community together through language and art have left a remarkable legacy evident in the dozens of issues printed over the last 37 years.

As we step in to fill Professor Yarbrough's shoes, we do not take our new roles lightly. We are eager to build on the great work done by Dr. Brown and Professor Yarbrough and create something they would be proud of, while respectfully guiding the process down the paths we felt needed exploration. As we reviewed past issues in preparation for publication, we began to realize that above all else, *FORCES* is an expression of the Collin College community. Each issue is a time capsule, a distillation of the essence of the year in which it was produced. Therefore, we wanted our first issue of *FORCES* to encapsulate the creative vibrancy of the community as it exists today, right now in 2026.

As this year's entries began to arrive, we began to see a theme emerge — the need for comfort, the desire to feel secure, the search to find stability and solace in a world of change. Our little, green cover star represents this. He sits nestled in his armchair, cozy and comfortable with a book, finding solace in a simple pleasure.

Many of the images and stories here reflect a contemplative stance, one that is honed by thoughtful consideration that can only be found in a place where one is allowed to nurture one's thoughts and face chaos on one's own terms. The images and stories within reflect this. A narrator facing his own regret, a young man finding his place in the world, a student finding comfort sketching deep into the night demonstrate that quiet and safety engender contemplation. This celebration of simplicity is illustrated here by the depiction of the pleasure of a good meal, the familiarity of driving down a well-traveled road, or finding security wrapped in the warm blanket of faith.

This is **FORCES 2026**, and we hope you enjoy it as much as we enjoyed creating it.

We would like to thank Division Dean Dr. Meredith Martin, Frisco Campus Provost Dr. Diana Hopes, District President Dr. Neil Matkin, the Board of Trustees, and the Student Activity Fee Advisory Committee (SAFAC) for making this great publication possible. We would also like to thank the fantastic Communications staff who were instrumental in putting this issue into print and online: Marlene Miller, Destine Gibson, and Donna Kinder. Without their help, guidance, and graphic design magic, we would never have been able to bring this publication together. A deep bow and copious kudos must also go to Anna Fritzel and Claudette Lowery of The Art Gallery at the Plano Campus, Glenn Trueman of the Fine Arts Division, and Professor Richard LeBlanc for producing many of the promotional materials. Finally, we want to spotlight Angela R. Klewicki in Academic Affairs on the Frisco Campus, who made sure everything went to the place it was supposed to go. They are truly *FORCES* to be reckoned with!

Dr. Sean Ferrier-Watson,
Prose and Poetry Editor

Professor George Neal, Art Editor



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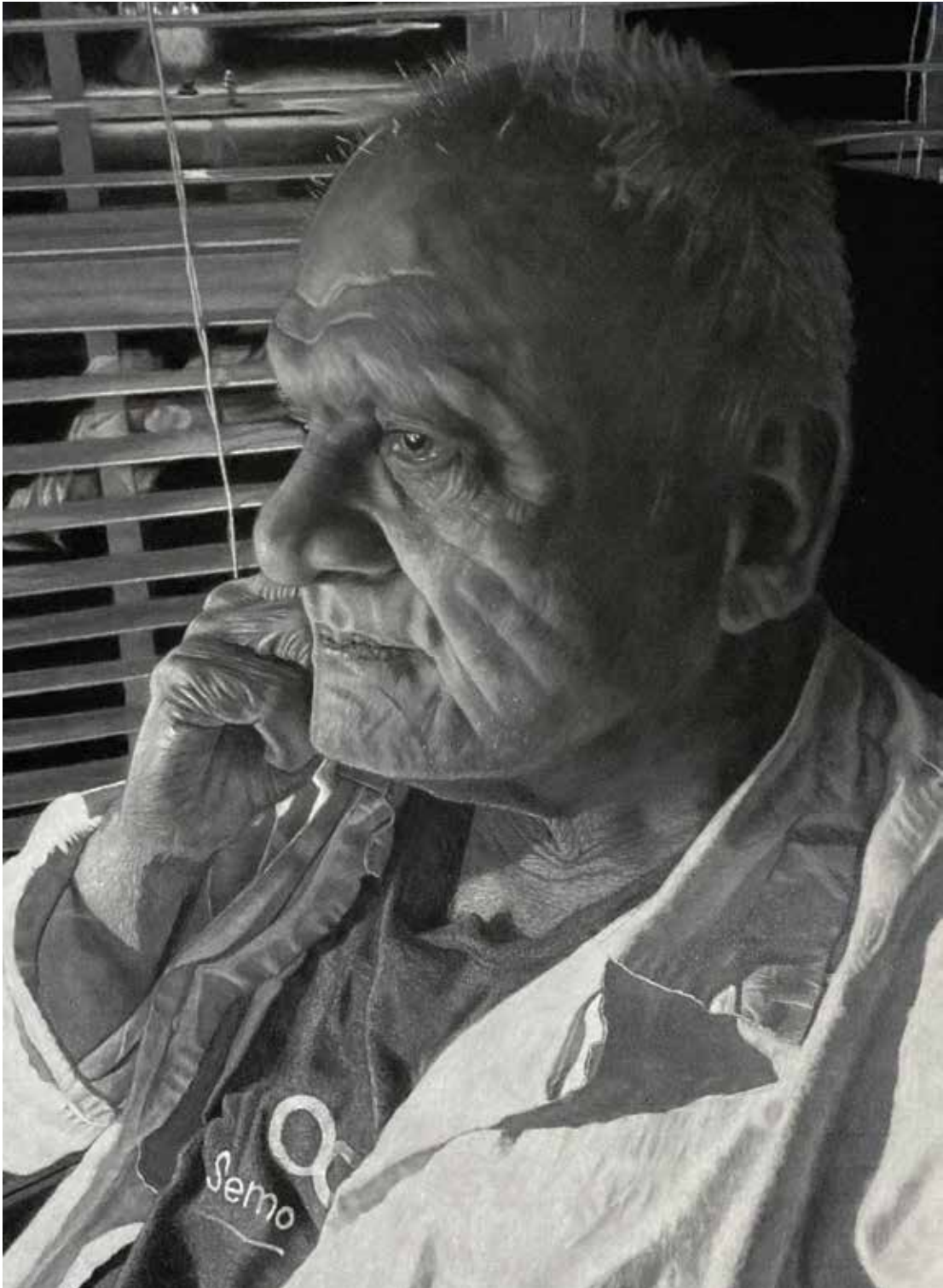
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Other Worldly Pondering Numa Nazeem

Confined

Rei T. Franchina

Confined by time,
she is no longer an artist.
She hides her face in shame.

Kicking the bucket,
her thoughts only amount to a pathetic
feeling that she must claim.

Hues of red and shades of blue
are stuck beneath her fingertips;
a reminder of what was,
and what may never truly be.

Dreams and joys die
beneath her pale,
malnourished chest,

as she lies amongst
them for comfort,
in her last, dying breath.

Turn into dirt
to be taken by the wind,

she can finally be the artist
she has always
wanted to have been.

For the pale greens of the earth,
the soft fuzz of the mold,
they don't demand of her, they don't ask her to perform.

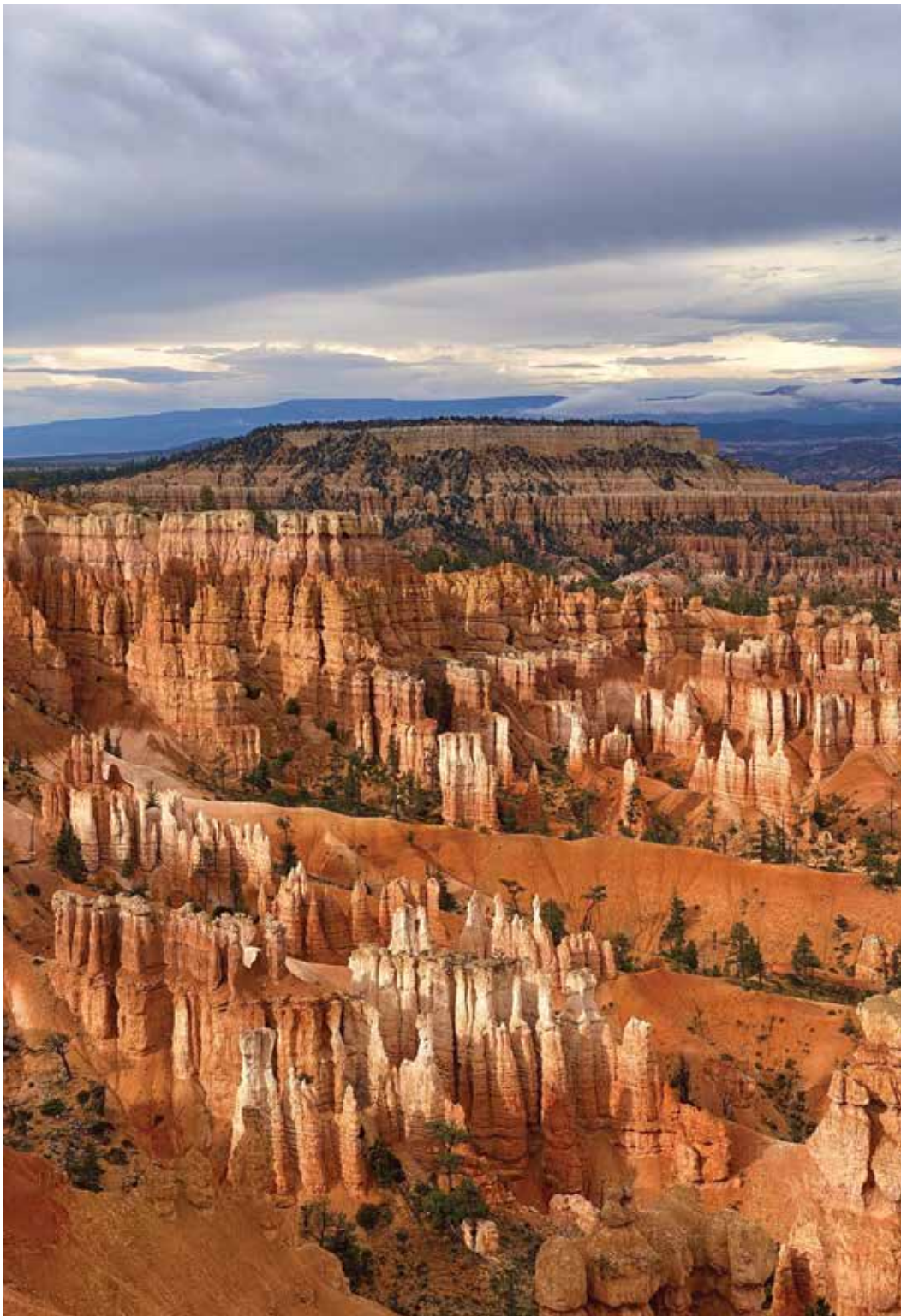
Rather, they mix the tones of the earth,
just for her,
creating a beautiful storm.

She dances in the sweep, finally being able to breathe,
no longer confined to her physical body,
she can be an artist;
the one
she has always
wanted to have been.





Tender Light Through the Leaves Gilbert Hu



Alchemist's Palette Fatima Tu Zahra

Stand Tall

Sophia Gozlan

Step by step, the shadows speak,
Whispers rising, whispers weak.
Step by step, don't let them see,
A frown that steals your dignity.
Hold your head high, roots run deep,
A heritage the soul must keep.
Hold your head high, though vultures near,
Your pride is stronger than their sneer.

When you fall, rise once more,
Strength is sharper at its core.
When you fall, don't linger long,
Their hatred only makes you strong.
Stay yourself, let kindness shine,
Answer cruelty with the divine.
Stay yourself, though darkness spreads,
Light survives where courage treads.

Bottles then the Morning

Oliver R. Smith

A box-wine topped-off water bottle,
And three empty tin cans strewn around,
Laying lightly on my left side.

But if the car goes in reverse,
And the sun walks backwards,
I can see the future,
And where the culprit lies.

I can feel the sun breaking out,
I can feel his footsteps coming,
Eye-Beams like the bright sky rays,
Beating down, down, and down, down, down.

Then the silver ceramic slicing scythe comes in.
Harvests me once for sin,
Twice for the lack of a silver tongue,
Thrice for false words sung,
A fourth time for an exposition,
And the final one, a warning to get out.

Pack up, wander off into the bright beating sun,
And into the vehicle's passenger seat.
The breaths and embraces,
Tight, leaving dull, saddened, upended land.
It all blurs past while my vessel lies there,
Like a seashell waiting in the patient sand,
Of a shoreline that stretches for who knows how long.

And it all comes to a halt,
I'm a slug and the man in blue is salt,
Makes me shrivel up with the seat down,
Waiting for it to all be over.

The final glass underneath
The lonely dining room cabinet
"Is the glass half full or half empty?"
The latter.



Late Nights Baylee Boyd

The Blue Crayon

Sophie N. Brotherton

“Look at what you’ve done.”

But I did it without looking — without a true target, or even any real sense of aim. The phrase is celebratory yet criticizing; it’s dependent. I resented it for being just as un-directional as I was; Was I brilliant for it being effortless, or monstrous for acting without consideration?

Originally hearing the saying while I clutched a blue crayon, scribbling once on the wall and then on paper. First, it was spoken to me in a disciplinary tone, but then it encouraged my creativity when it appeared on paper, where it *belonged*.

When told to “look at what we’ve done,” anyone can look down at their own hands and perceive them as good or bad. When I do, I’m still holding the crayon, except I look and stare

in admiration, not regret. That waxy crayon coating will peel off paper, or even a wall, sooner or later. Although the little specs of Crayola blue remain in my home's dining room, barely noticeable on the lower left portion of the wall. The blemish wasn't in the house's foundational blueprint, of course, but that little action barely shows up on the large, welcoming home it truly is.

While not every line I've drawn was in a purposeful direction or had a planned outcome, it still contributed to the same masterpiece, and it certainly does not feature staying inside the lines or the crayon box. The creation being myself, I know now those rebellious sketches were testing the limits of the box, the frame, and the phrase that followed it.

Being hyperaware as a child drove me into curiosity, through tests and experiments of how far I could push, what socially I could get away with at my age, and how entertaining it was to play into the excuse of being "just a kid." With time, it bored me due to being met with the same familiar five words.

Years went by, exercising my visionary skills. Awards, oohs and aahs, even scoring a 5 in AP Art; I must have been talented, even if it was without great effort. Ironically, I'm still confronted with being asked to look at what I've done, what I have and will continue to create. It instilled a growth of compassion to keep contributing my skills to connect people through innovative artistic choices, although if the crayon's markings of "Pacific Blue" could fade from the wall, it was not bold enough. How could that striking color be so easily erased? Was it old or just hidden?

Today, I don't strive to be a vandal or limit myself to one shade of blue, but to remember that not every mark defaces a product: it can define it, and reunite a person with where they belong. "Look at what you've done" isn't always villainizing, it can be liberating. It means now I get to see that blue, and all the other colors unfold beyond myself. I've learned to value that far more than an effortless talent, because without it, there'd be no inspiration, no reflection, and no blend of flaws and flourishes. Not through defiance, but a daringness to connect with people who've also seen that blue, heard that remark, and wondered endlessly how such a narrow grouping of words can sum up an assembly of people enduring all different colors.

Today, I don't strive to be a vandal or limit myself to one shade of blue, but to remember that not every mark defaces a product; it can define it, and reunite a person with where they belong.

The Only Way Forward

Michelle Cepelak

If you thought gray
was just a color,
you'd be wrong.

Gray is the space in
between black and white

and

the difference between
moving forward and
backward.

Is it possible to read
between the lines of
thinking and feeling,
my gray as compared
to your gray?

Maybe,
maybe not.

But there is no going
back for me, only gray.

The Weight of Words

Tyra Crawford

I recall sitting at my little kitchen table, nine years old, when my mother told me, “Tyra, you have always been bigger, you will always be bigger, so no one will ever really love you.” I did not understand how serious she was at the time, yet her words felt heavy, like rocks dropping inside me. One comment started as a small thing; however, it became a big problem for how I felt about myself. It changed my thoughts about love, trust, and my role in life. This story examines how a childhood untruth from my mother changed how I see things, affected how I grew up emotionally, still shapes my connections with others, and how I feel about myself. I will explore how a single hurtful fabrication can change how people see things, though it also has the potential to help them recover and cultivate contentment. This narrative is a beacon of hope, showing that recovery and contentment are possible. There will be stories, studies of the mind, and observations about how the world thinks about beauty to prove the point.

My mom spoke softly like it was nothing, yet her words hit me like a ton of bricks, and instantly I felt that lump in my throat, and tears started to form.

Legs swinging, wearing my beloved pink shirt which started to feel snug around my belly, my favorite pink tutu feeling tight around my hips. My mom spoke softly like it was nothing, yet her words hit me like a ton of bricks, and instantly I felt that lump in my throat, and tears started to form. I worried other people would feel the same if my mom doubted I was worthy of love. The lie stayed with me, changing how I remembered every conversation. I doubted my friendships at school, thinking people were just being kind out of pity. At family gatherings, I gazed at my smaller cousins and saw what society had brainwashed me to see as desirable bodies. Looking back, I was unaware that one comment caused a plethora of worry, making me unsure of myself for years. It taught me to wonder if I was good enough before I learned what genuine affection felt like.

My mother’s lie opened a claim of self-doubt that would ultimately alter how I thought about feeling loved, and believing I deserved good things. I started to think about how I looked, which determined my worth. This affected the people I chose to be with and stopped me from saying no when I should have. It took a long time to understand that she spoke from



Reflections Jayna Burch

her doubts, not what was happening with me. However, I believed her words completely then, feeling their impact heavily.

Experts have discovered that when parents comment about weight or appearance, it can significantly affect a child's emotional well-being and self-esteem over time. A 2024 study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that parental criticism and media pressures contribute to body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem in children, creating a lasting effect well into adolescence and adulthood.

The impact of my mother's lie was not limited to my personal life; it permeated the societal narrative. The media, including television shows, celebrity endorsements, and popular trends, often echo my mom's sentiment. It is rare to see larger women portrayed as the main characters in romantic shows or movies — they are usually punch lines or comedic relief. Research shows that TikTok's "What I Eat in a Day" videos, even when calorie information isn't displayed, increase body-related shame and drive dieting intentions among young women by triggering unhealthy social comparisons. Social media frequently showcases unattainable body images, further reinforcing my mother's belief. People with a large social media following display limited food choices, connecting them to looking good, finding a partner, or achieving other desired outcomes. These messages remind me of what I was taught growing up: people only show affection if you embody the ideal body image. Recent trends, like Lizzo celebrating all body types, shows like *Shrill*, and marketing efforts dispute this idea, demonstrating that people possess value regardless of their body type. Observing societal changes allowed me to ponder differently, develop self-acceptance, and rewrite my personal story.

**Growing older and wiser
gave me insight;
I understand my mom's remark is inaccurate.**

Growing older and wiser gave me insight;
I understand my mom's remark is inaccurate.

A counter example is my favorite aunt, who is a plus-size beauty. She is not the ideal targeted woman, yet she has been married a long time, showing everyone that she is someone who can find love no matter her size.

After countless and continuing therapy sessions, combined with really thinking about myself, I started to rid my mind of ideas I believed about myself that were not true. I discovered that taking care of myself is not self-centered or essential. A falsehood I once thought would ruin everything has

helped me grow more sure of myself. It steered me toward people who appreciated me for my personality, not my appearance. I discovered genuine affection, not from changing my appearance but from accepting myself.

My mother's negative thought that I would never find real love due to my size was soul-crushing. It affected how I grew up, influencing my views on love, believing in others, and valuing myself. I have realized that the remarks from our parents, even harsh ones, do not need to control our love permanently. Studies demonstrate how stigmatizing messages affect kids, yet my experience illustrates how people recover, changing how we think about ourselves. I now prefer to think about love this way: receiving and giving do not depend on appearance; they rely on honesty, consideration, and genuine care. A brutal falsehood turned into something that makes me strong; it reminds me that I have always had value.

Flower Shaped Box

Jonathan Miranda

Her gift,
stolen, far away,
smuggled in a cozy blanket,
spiked with perfume.

His offering,
plucked from Eden,
left to wilt in the sun,
next to a porcelain vase.

To Grandmother's House We Go

Ryan Farrar

The autumn smiled on me with its nutmeg leaves, ashen air, and towering pines which loomed like giants guarding over a small cottage. We were finally pulling into the driveway. The trek from Fort Worth to Carthage was always grueling. And yet, it had its own excitement. The sight of the two city skylines waving at each other like friends departing felt like a mirage, and the Chevy's wheels hitting all the small bumps on the road cozily rocked in rhythm with my heart. The metropolis receded and woodlands sprouted in its place. Five-year-old brains are like thumbprint cookies, and the boscaje of East Texas made quite an impression on mine before setting it into the oven to bake. Grammy's and Grampy's home had a coniferous, floral musk about it. The scent of collie dander, eggshells, and some unmistakable stale odor, given off only by dwellers of long years, all hugged the nooks and crannies of this snug, rustic retreat.

The home radiated with warmth, complete with a hearth and customary deer mount posted above to stand watch over us all. We relaxed in the alcove next to a window that overlooked the stretch of yellowed grass that made up the front yard. The glows of orange that saturated the outside coated the inside as well. The cool terracotta tile would push hard against the balls of our feet, which you would think were lightly floating across its surface; how speedily my brother and I raced down those halls! In our wake, you could hear the scrape of dog nails running in place, struggling to follow after. Chicken and egg memorabilia, ranging from spoon rests to engraved wooden paddles, hung on the walls alongside browning husks of corn. Grammy stumped around, tending to this and that. She was a dwarf innkeeper with cropped snow hair and bread slice-sized glasses hanging from the bridge of her nose. She carried the meekness of a mouse, one who would kindly implore you with cap in hand if she needed to request a favor. Grampy on the other hand often lounged in his recliner, snoring like a grizzly if he fell asleep, and he fell asleep often. He was certainly stouter than the dwarf whose head he would fondly pat from time to time; he had the build of an ex-Marine and was an ardent lover of bass fishing. Though jovial, he maintained a gruff persona around us, and despite his soporific tendencies, he was a grandpappa bear who could paw around with the cubs when excitement stirred.

For a tyke like me, this was a fairy-tale setting, replete with forest creatures. The hummingbirds were the most brilliant and wiliest of them all.

For a tyke like me, this was a fairy-tale setting, replete with forest creatures. The hummingbirds were the most brilliant and wiliest of them all. They would flock to the feeder, raging for the red syrup inside, tapping each other on the shoulder to



Beauty is Truth - Truth is Beauty Gary Wilson

make the other look. It was a blithe escape. There was a pool and a hot tub, along with grass that was free of stickers. It couldn't be beat! If these weren't my grandparents, I would have thought my brother and I were inhabiting a dream. We were Hansel and Gretel, and we had just stumbled upon a quaint house full of sweets and ginger.

Their border collies, Revelie and Foxie, ran between our legs as we filled the cottage corridors with peals of laughter. Living the idyllic life, Grammy wanted to treat us boys to a special meal. The aroma of fresh-baked dinner rolls wafted across the beige ceiling and nestled just behind the rims of our nostrils. You could sense how fluffy the bread was going to be just by surveying its puffy exterior. A whole chicken baked in the oven came out glistening in its own juices, which trickled down over the trussed legs. It was crisp and golden. A velvety peppercorn gravy was sure to coat its slices like a river overcoming the banks

that vainly tried to contain it. Grammy invested so much time to prepare a home-cooked meal full of all that country goodness. Sadly, for us, dessert must have been an afterthought.

With the table cleared, Grammy extracted a round tin from the oven. A flight of steam rose and appeared to take toward the heavens. Looking back, I should have known that the steam was running away. What the tin contained was a mystery. The filling was concealed by an upper crust that resembled a sandy desert. A manhole to hide the sewage. Come to find, dessert was a pie. I had had my share of pies — well, apple and chocolate. Except, those were both fragrant and full of flavor, even for a kid. However, what Grammy grasped between her hands and laid on the table triggered in me a slight, but heavily unpleasant, gag reflex. The simultaneous tightening and loosening of my throat were unfamiliar sensations, and my eyes bunched

and bulged, as they filled with both surprise and fright. Then, the dwarfish old lady picked up a knife and cut into it. Branded onto my irises were blue goo-covered globules that bore the look and feel of congealed blood mixed with snot. The ghostly paper wad underneath, posturing as a crust, became a sponge stained by its gluey juices. Really, it looked more like a sopped-up diaper brimming with some kind of algal diarrhea than a pie. Yet, my brother's face still beamed and glowed as a candle's flame illuminating a hallway at a bewitching hour, and his eyes locked on the slice that was to be placed before him.

Grammy set our respective slices on the table and then plopped a small dollop of store-bought whipped cream onto the spuming blubbery pie. She must have thought such could have hid the crime. She pushed the plates under our faces and smiled at the joy she thought she was heralding unto us. Eagerly, my brother scarfed down the abomination. He loved it. He ravaged his piece, tearing the blueberry flesh violently between his teeth, and it screeched like the sound of rubber, which swirled down into the spiral of my ears, where it would ring for all eternity. I stared in bewilderment. I adored dessert, but that viscous slop clinging to the plate had bubbling eyes. The beady orbs of which pierced into me, tickling the underside of my ribs. I whiffed the stench of something cloyingly putrid, and in short, I was afraid. Of course, I'm not one to shy away from probing the unknown. I wanted Grammy to be pleased. So, I slid my fork through the spongy ooze and lifted the mess to my mouth. I let the sour tang invade each fissure of my tongue, coating all its corners like dried paint. The skins of the

blueberries were leather. The acrid tartness nearly made me projectile vomit the mashed bits onto the floor, but somehow, I managed to swallow. It was too much, and I decided to speak my peace.

"Grammy."

"Yes, darling?"

"I don't like it."

A dark shade fell upon her face, and her voice became sharp.

"You don't like it!?"

"I'm sorry, Grammy. I don't. Could I have something else or be excused?"

"No, sir! You will learn to appreciate what you're given, and you will eat every bite until it's gone. Don't even think of budging from that chair!"

My brother had already finished his ration and ran off with the dogs while I sat petrified and amazed. She really was more wolf than mouse. A gray pall had cast itself between me and the flaxen hug the woodlands had initially extended. My eyes welled up, and tremors shook my body. Finishing such a mucilaginous paste was harder than growing lemons on a mountaintop. It was like eating sour garbage, and it took grit not to retch each time I forced a spoonful down my gullet. At one point, I could not stand it anymore, and ever so stealthily, I pushed back my chair, but its wooden legs squeaked against the tile floor.

"Get your butt back in that chair! Have you finished every bit?! I didn't think so!"

The joy was gone. It took all of three hours and an incessant outpouring of tears before the deed was complete. And yet, there was no going back. There was no forgetting. To this day, I loathe, despise, deplore, abhor blueberries. It doesn't even matter if they are fresh. Friends laugh and jest when I tell them of my aversion, but the memory is so odious that it has etched itself deep into my very core. There is a tradition of reverence and appreciation for what we have in this world, and I get that. We should encourage those we love to appreciate what we give each other. But those three hours taught me that love is lost on fear, and that it is wolfish to punish someone with food. To all I host at my table, you may be excused.



**Ceramic Turtle
Jewelry Dish**
Rida Rabbani

The Grandchildren and The Memories

Viona A. Diorga

The laughter of the grandchildren filled the entire house with joy. Everyone who walked in front of the house could feel their happiness.

An old Samsung TV in the middle of the living room was showing a 2006-released film, *Barbie Fairytopia: Mermaidia*, and it successfully stole the whole attention of the grandchildren. Yes, of course, they laughed so hard because of a blue-haired little creature with fancy pink hair on top of its head that sticks up, who acts like a little kid with all its pureness, naughtiness, and cleverness. At that time, the house had nothing but cheerfulness and the smell of their favorite snack. Warm fried bananas covered with sweet flour as sweet as caramel were ready to melt in every inch of their little mouths and deserved to be compared to a five-star restaurant's dessert.

The living room that is in the center of the two-floor house in Tangerang, Indonesia, has a statue of Mary and Jesus who bless Sumanto's big family every day. In that room, there was a long red sofa on the right side, a black display rack of old antique figures, plates, and teacups on the left, a painting of Grandma and Grandpa on the wall above the TV, a small black table under the statue standing next to the display rack, and a bed across from the TV where they made a mess.

All six grandchildren left memories on every side of the room and the house. The house was the only place where they could do various fun things. If they wanted to eat some sweet and juicy Panama berry, they only needed to take some steps from the kitty-corner of the grandma's house to an empty house with a big but short Panama berry tree in the front yard. Even though they fell repeatedly while trying to get the berry, the tree was their favorite spot. If they wanted to fly kites, the wind that always passed through the large balcony on the second floor would gladly help them. If they wanted to buy some snacks, they could walk five minutes to the small store behind the house. Salty Cheetos or sweet brownies, or even sour candy, which had never been chosen by the grandchildren, always greeted them on the white display table. The house felt like a playground that was run by Grandma and Aunty.

Now, in the present time, the house that the family rarely visits and where the grandchildren's parents spent their childhood, too, will be nothing but a tollway. Modernization will make the house into roads. Physical proof of their playful and cheerful memories soon cannot be touched or even seen. But although they cannot go back to the past and keep getting on, the memories of childhood will not grow old. The warmth of the memories will eternally be there and never change or fade in the grandchildren's hearts.



Man-Made Eden
Ava Dinh

Gilded

Susan Mardele

In a fever dream, I'm back
in the place I lived for a long season,
the thoughts gently rippling
in the soft breeze of memory.

Other than my parents' house,
I lived there the longest.
An enchanted place made of weathered cedar,
once a barn. We made it a home.

We gathered materials
and put them together harmoniously;
seven kinds of flooring, dumpster-dived tile.

There's a piece of green marble
on the kitchen counter
where my son's tiny shoe left a set of scratches.
We put it toward the back.

The island's granite countertop
where we ate some 5,840 breakfasts
came out of a bathroom in downtown Dallas.
It broke during plumbing repairs, and we took it home.

Tucked in a quiet corner of the Texas countryside,
the herons and egrets landed on the pond.
Nature and the softly undulating body of water
over the balcony, exuding peace.

It's the place where I cracked wide open,
letting out the darkness
that had gathered on the horizon,

Spilling it all into the arms of a receptive earth
that enfolded and consumed and forgave.

It's where the light came in.
In the glen where dragonflies
pirouetted with mosquitoes in a fatal dance,

Gilded in the early morning sunshine.

Peaches on a Silver Platter Bernadette Dozier



Grieving for a Dying Star

Lillian E. Brogan

Where the sea embraces the sand
And the sun kisses the land
I am only reminded of you
And the different outcomes
We could have had
If we had both chosen a different path

I see your face etched into the sky
Made up of stars and dying wishes
The clouds covering what should have been your eyes
Each day becoming more and more
Unrecognizable

I sketch your face into the margins of my notebooks
My pencil making quick work of the blank canvas
I can't remember your eyes
Or your smile
All of your pictures melted together
Into a cacophony of a person
That just isn't you

Abstinence

Lily J. Turner

I was having too much fun to even notice that I was there
And the second I did, I felt my neck start to itch
And I shifted my legs to hide myself better
So maybe I can forget again

If I had been molded better, prioritized my vanity more
Still obsessed with myself, like a dog chasing a rabbit
Eager to kill it, bury the bones, never to be seen again
But the rabbit is too quick, and the dog is too sluggish
And I know it couldn't catch him if it tried
So I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling
And I curse my own name

I hate so flippantly, and it eats away at my sobriety
I've become complacent with the worst parts of myself
Even though I've done good and continue to pursue it
I'll only be proud of myself when my mother is

I beg the clouds to move so I can catch
Just one glimpse
To remember you
To remember your face
But the clouds refuse and instead grow denser
Laughing at my demise

I lay in the sand as the wind blows
Papers and pictures of you clutched tightly against my chest
My heart slows
The sand begins to settle upon my skin
Blanketing my body
Covering up my turmoil
And the thoughts I hold of you

I miss you.

I wish we both could have been stronger
I wish we weren't betrayed
I wish we weren't hurt
I wish we weren't destined to fall apart
I wish we could have said something

I wish,
I wish,
I wish.



The Mind as Cosmos

Billy Smith

After Descartes, Berkeley, and Bostrom

The world has been unmade before —
The planet spun from heaven's core,
The soul descended from its throne,
The rational self, dethroned, alone.

One citadel remained, and fast:
The thinking "I" that would outlast
all doubt. I am. The final stone.
But now, the seed of self is sown
in stranger ground. A question grows:
What if the mind both dreams and knows?

The skeptic's knife, a keen despair,
severs the earth, the fire, the air.
It cuts the cord of sense and sight,
leaves but the thinker in the night —
a single point, a lonely spark.
The world outside? A phantom, dark.
And other minds? A hollow plea.
The ultimate reality
is just my own consciousness —
a perfect, stark loneliness.

Then, from the terminal, a new dread:
A statistician's vision, spread
like neon code. A trilemma's claim:
We are the ghosts in the machine's frame,
and other souls are NPCs
in a simulation's breeze.
The solid world, a likely lie,
beneath a simulated sky.

A gentler thought: not mine, but *Mind*.
A single psyche, unconfined,
whose alters we all are — a sea
of fractured consciousness, yet free
from solipsism's iron cell.
In death, we break the brittle shell
and rejoin the oceanic All,
answering the separate self's sad call.

If all's a dream, what grounds the good?
Why act as if the other stood
as real as I? The face appears,
and makes its claim before the years
can justify or reason prove.
It speaks a language older than love.
And so, we choose. We take a stand
and hold a phantom, trembling hand.
We build our meaning, make a pact
to live *as if* the world's a fact.

The final frontier is not a place,
but the abyss behind the face.
And in that void, we must decide
to be the anchor, deep inside.

Tenant of A Strange Inheritance

Billy Smith

At the table, a friend's soul laid bare — God, growth, the
architecture of pain. The question of food, a considerate
grace, then a man with a gun, a shift of space, a hallway,
a raised hand, a flight through pouring rain.

I fled a building that changed its skin, a liar's facade
against the sky. The road home twisted, a forgotten
lie, leading to wolves where crossroads lie. Their fight
a frenzy, a feral, rolling din.

One thrown against my passenger's door, its eye a
pinprick of amber hold. I smelled my dog, it smelled
my fear, the window's crack bringing death too near.
A thud on the fender, a story to be told.

I woke with the jolt of a journey failed, the tenant of
dreams I did not write — of a burning man, a child's
claim, a friend's deep talk, a wolf's cold aim, all howling
through the architecture of the night.

internal dialogue

Michelle Cepelak

i am made of thoughts:

nighttime thoughts
blue-black velvet thoughts

barely remembered thoughts
broken and beautiful thoughts

wistful, hold 'em close thoughts
swiftly discontinued thoughts

connect-the-dots thoughts
better-in-the-daytime thoughts

exhausted and limp thoughts
fluttering, free thoughts

over and over and over thoughts
brilliant and defensive thoughts

wishful thinking thoughts
is this forever? thoughts



Sapphire Reverie
Nichole D. Knight

In Your Words

Maliakah Ali

There are no words for how I feel,
but you attempt a faithful translation
Preserving my personal contradictions
Giving nuance to my cracks and ridges
You've grown to understand my context
A study conducted in silent observation
To be looked at and seen

You unravel me beneath your thumb
Every messy layer curling back
like the pliant rind of an orange
Smearing all over your fingers and your shirt
Yet, you always smile and persist.
There are no words for how I feel,
But I know you understand.



Amethyst Crown
Nichole D. Knight



The Beauty of the Taj Mahal Abraham Arra



Beauty of Life Georgia K. McCaughan

Moonlit Lake

Lillian E. Brogan

The one whom I love the most
Stands upon the water
In the center of my moonlit lake
Singing the same song of the swans
As She does every night

Ethereal and stunning,
A Goddess among mortals that I worship ardently
I wish to be the object of Her affection
To be the one She calls *Home*

I kneel at the edge of the lake
Hands clasped together
Eyes that were once wide in wonder
Now shut tightly
Head bowed as I greet Her in all of Her glory
Praying for Her to set Her sights on me just this once

Her song is just as sorrowful as any other night
Longing for a Siegfried who will never love Her
Eyes wet with tears for a fairytale prince
Who cast Her aside for a woman
Who doesn't truly love him either

Kneeling, I wonder why She won't look at me
I swear to Her that I could be better than any stupid prince
That I could wipe Her tears
That I would never be the one who fills Her with sorrow
That I could love Her as She is
That I would never leave Her

If it were up to me
She wouldn't have been a swan in the first place
I would've loved Her dearly
And She would never have been bound by the lake

I tread into the water
Eyes set directly on She who stands upon the water
Hoping for a single look that would change my life forever

I climb onto a rock
Hands outstretched to Her
Awaiting Her reply as She opens her eyes
Sparing me that one glance I had been waiting for
All of eternity

Her eyes sparkling like the purest of diamonds in the moonlight
As clear as the cleanest of waters
Silver and intimidating and beautiful and
Everything I could've ever imagined and more
From just Her eyes alone

She takes my hands
Pulling me onto the water's surface
Those daunting silver eyes of Hers
Pulling me in like the moon pulls the tides
Like the sun pulls the colours across the sky

She takes me into Her arms
And my breath hitches in my throat

The one whom I love the most
Holds me gently against her chest
As though we were meant to be together
And we plunge into the dark lake together
The water blinding my vision and the cold seeping into my bones

I pledged to be Her Siegfried
To be better than Her Siegfried
So I willingly plunge into the dark water with Her
To die alongside Her
To allow the water to bleed into my lungs
To kill me before I can even think
As She holds me close

Dear Odette
Thank You for the most pleasant gift
A goddess could give Her most devout follower
To die in Your arms
To die with You



Angel

Mya Llamas

She visits me in my dreams,
leaves with stolen kisses.
One last glimpse of her heavy wings,
her halo tarnished and brittle.

She dances with the devil
on the edge of despair.
If you get too close, you'll get a good scare.

Her eyes weak, never truly there,
a beautiful ghost.
She whispers secrets into the dark,
and if you hear them
it'll leave you with a bite mark.

Sitting in the shadows of shame
she wonders if life would ever be the same.
Battling between light and dark
by the break of dawn, she'll be gone as a spark.

Beware, beware,
in case you hear whispers
in the cold, chilling air
just know you're now trapped in the affair.

She sinks deeper
into her own bloody creation
you can get close to her,
but never quite reach her.

Haunted by memories
which fail to fade away
she burns the world
with one final kiss.



Manmade Beauty Macey L. Loureiro

January 2nd (Loneliest Day of the Year)

Maliakah Ali

Another morning steeped in grey
Walking through the city alone
And the cold is unyielding
Red spots bloom on my cheeks
I thought I was burning

(I carry two drinks
One tea, one coffee
I couldn't decide on just one)

Warmth spreads across my palm
Down my spine, to the absent space
Shaped for a hand to rest against

How do nomads bear the weight of their lives
As they haul it on their backs?
With no place to set down their heart
And no place to belong?

The small of my back aches.

Knight of Cups

Sabrina Rahman

On his steed of ivory, a hero rides
Chivalrous, quixotic, charisma vermeil
Bearing a chalice, a heart on his sleeve side
A gentleman of warmth and charm to beguile

Be not fooled, as he veers too vainglorious
Melting promises as not all meet a gleaming gaze
Moody, melancholic, fervidly useless
Empty flattery; grandiose, idle praise

What Rings True

Austen L. Barnes

I can still remember the first time I saw *The Ring*. It was in my Grandma's basement in Wisconsin, unfinished, with its low ceiling and dangling bulbs, as though the house itself wasn't sure whether it was ready to be lived in. The couch cushions had that faint mustiness that every basement seems to have, like old laundry no amount of air freshener can ever really fix. I was twelve years old at the time and someone had rented the movie from Blockbuster. As we slid the DVD into the silver tray and watched the machine pull it in, I got the feeling we were entering forbidden territory.

When the static came on the screen, a sound like television snowfall, I shivered. My cousin laughed and shoved a half-empty bag of Doritos at me, but the crunching only made the silence around us more noticeable. That basement seemed to swell with shadows the longer we sat there. I could swear the string of Christmas lights along the wall flickered on cue with the jump scares, though that was probably just my young mind imagining things. Still, when Samara crawled out of that television screen, her hair wet and dripping like pond weeds, we all screamed so loudly I swear I could hear a ringing sound afterwards, no pun intended.

At twelve, I believed in the kind of darkness that could leak out of a screen. I believed in the power of a VHS tape to curse someone, in the possibility that ghosts were waiting just out of sight, peering around corners with patient hunger. Horror was less a genre than a window into a truth I hadn't yet learned how to argue with. At the time, the world felt large, mysterious, and dangerous. Anything could happen.

But when I rewatched *The Ring* five years later, in my room and alone at night, I didn't even flinch. The same static-filled images, the same horse

leaping off the ferry, the same dripping girl; but the entire thrill of being scared had disappeared. What had once been an unbearable terror now looked suspiciously like an over-acted Tubi movie. Samara didn't feel like a spirit from the underworld anymore; she looked like an underpaid actress trapped under a bucket of stage makeup. I caught myself laughing, even as I wanted to hold on to that younger self's trembling belief.

Something had changed. Not the movie — it hadn't aged well, but it hadn't really changed. I had.

The odd detail that stood out during that rewatch wasn't the ghost girl or the cursed tape; it was the remote in my hand. I could fast-forward her right back into the well she had crawled out of. The very existence of that button, that power, seemed to undercut her menace. At twelve, I didn't think about control. At 18, I knew I was the one pressing "play."

Fear itself has changed shape. I don't tremble at the thought of pale girls in long white dresses anymore.

Maybe that's the real reason scary movies lose their teeth as we get older. Not because the monsters get sillier, but because we've learned how much control we actually have. When you're a kid, the world is big and full of hands that can snatch you away, whether it be your parents, teachers, or even strangers in vans, and there's a fear that comes with that. But when you grow older, you learn that life is less about invisible monsters and more about visible fake friendships, monthly bills, and deadlines. The things that haunt you as an adult can't be vanquished by turning on the lights.

Fear itself has changed shape. I don't tremble at the thought of pale girls in long white dresses anymore. Instead, I lie awake wondering if I'll ever make enough money to live the way I want or if my dream job will still be around or if AI will take over, or if the people I love will stay healthy, or if the choices I'm making now will harden into regrets later.

Horror movies still flicker across screens, but their shadows don't stretch as far as they used to. Sometimes, I wish they did. I wish I could go back to that basement and scream alongside my cousins, our terror pure and simple. Back then, the worst thing in the world was a ghost that might crawl out of the television. Now, the worst thing is knowing no pause button exists for time, no remote control for real life.

And yet somehow, maybe that's the hidden gift of horror growing weaker as we grow older. It reminds us of how we've changed, what we've lived through. Ghosts make room for student loans. Cursed tapes make way for lost and unhealthy relationships. The movies haven't

stopped being scary because they were never really about the monsters at all. They were about what we were ready to believe in and what we needed to be afraid of.

Still, every now and then, I'll turn off the lights, sink into the couch, and let myself try. I'll try to feel the hair-raising terror of that first viewing, try to forget the remote in my hand. For just a second, I'll pretend that Samara really could crawl through the screen and reach me. And in that pretending, I catch a glimpse of something deeper. And that is the way fear, no matter its form, binds us to the fact that we are alive, watching the flickering images, waiting to see what comes next.

The Miles Between

Jonathan Miranda

Your eye beams caught mine, shocked at the way I strut.
Our rubber souls synced in lock step with one another.
Sparks fly, igniting our unknown adventures.
Firing in order, perfect timing made our idle healthy and strong.

You clutched my stem and dropped my pedals until you loved me.
Despite our different strokes, you never seemed to bore.
Lean or rich, you always gave me fuel.
My dented, scratched, peeling body
Forever held a beautiful patina in your sight.

Signals are missed, accidents happen, I throw codes, belts slip,
Until timing and compression are lost.
We bog all the way down.
Jacked up, my patience and your elbow grease kept us going.
Prolong the inevitable.
A few more miles, please.

We both know where this road ends.
I will end up in the junkyard, picked apart.
Your body will return to dirt, food for the worms.

Player 63

Bentley M. Brooks

“It’s that infernal watchmaker’s fault,” muttered Kaji’s mother, her bright gnome eyes glaring at him.

The gears and springs in the book-sized machine whirled and buzzed in his practiced hands, his tiny fingers moving nimbly over the worn metal buttons, long dull from use. “That’s enough!” she snapped. “Go fetch some mushrooms ... the purple ones — NOT the blue ones. And if you run into Raiko, don’t you dare start playin’ Stinko with him! You hurry right back here.”

Stinko — that’s what the grown-ups called it.

“Okay,” he grumbled. Jumping out of the window, he shouted back, “And it’s called TACTINKO!”

Kaji raced through the trees across creaking suspension bridges. Far below, a bubbling, silver stream beckoned. Sliding down a rope, he reached a quiet pool and peered into the still water before washing his ruddy face. Though only seven, his red beard was almost fully grown in, and he thought he could see his father’s wrinkles circling his snubby nose. Blinking his clear, blue eyes, he splashed away the fatigue brought on by hours of concentration.

Kaji wiped his face on a patch of spongy moss and headed towards a mushroom patch. He scampered quietly through the tall undergrowth, the only sign of his passage the bobbing of his pointed red hat. *Did she say purple or blue?* But more pressing, he wondered what Raiko’s high score was for the day. *His hut isn’t too far out of the way. Maybe he’s out doin’ chores.* Tucking a few mushrooms into his hat, he climbed the nearest ladder.

As he passed Raiko’s hut high in the trees, a taunting voice rang out, “Forty-seven!”

“What? No way!” Kaji cried.

“Oh yeah? Come see.”

Kaji sprinted over as fast as his short legs would carry him. “Show me,” he panted. He could scarcely believe his eyes — a 4 and a 7 on Raiko’s score dial. “How?”

“Come to my Tactinko class tomorrow and I might give you a lesson,” he said with a smirk. “That is, if you can afford it.”

Kaji trudged back to his hut, dejected and teary eyed. *It’s not fair!*

“Where’ve you been?” his mother scolded. “And these aren’t purple mushrooms, they’re blue! I bet you stopped by Raiko’s hut, didn’t you? Just you wait ‘til your papa hears ‘bout this!”

Almost every family was at the village meeting the next day. Raiko was there too, of course, as his father, Akin, was the tribal leader.

Kaji’s father spoke first, “Akin, we gotta do somethin’ ‘bout this! My son wastes all his time playin’ that dev’lish game. Ever since the Watchmaker made those contraptions, our young’uns have gotten dummer than mud!” Kaji slunk sheepishly in a corner. “Just the other day, Abner’s little girl fell out of a tree whilst playin’ it.”

Another parent jumped in, “I ‘ear that Watchmaker worked with a wizard to make Stinko. He’s put a spell on our young’uns!”

Other villagers chimed in, sharing their frustrations.

“Now, now friends, let’s not be hasty,” Akin pleaded, his deep voice calm and reassuring. “I know it takes some gettin’ used to, but the Watchmaker has assured me that Tactinko is harmless and is, in fact, quite nurt’rin’ for young minds. I know many of you made sacrifices to purchase this marvelous game for your young’uns. The Watchmaker is very grateful and, even as I speak, is buildin’ a wonderful place for them

all to play together. We'll be havin' a special celebration at the New Moon, and you're all welcome."

Over the next couple of weeks, the village buzzed with excitement. Every child with a Tactinko game was given a shiny new version, compliments of the Watchmaker. Kaji had no idea of the purpose of all the new holes and cables, and there were many more buttons and dials that seemed to give information about other players.

The day of the New Moon finally came. Wearing their best clothes, Kaji and his parents climbed a ladder to the treetops where the Watchmaker had built a spectacular platform. On it sat a gigantic circular table around which dozens of children chattered, each with their Tactinko game connected to a web of cords and cables.

"Quick now ... find a spot at the table and plug in!" boomed Akin above the din. "You'll be able to play 'gainst everyone here."

Kaji raced around the table and found an open seat labeled *PLAYER 63*. Beaming with pride, he plugged in, settled back in his chair, and imagined the possibilities.

**Beaming with pride,
he plugged in,
settled back in his chair,
and imagined
the possibilities.**

Fence

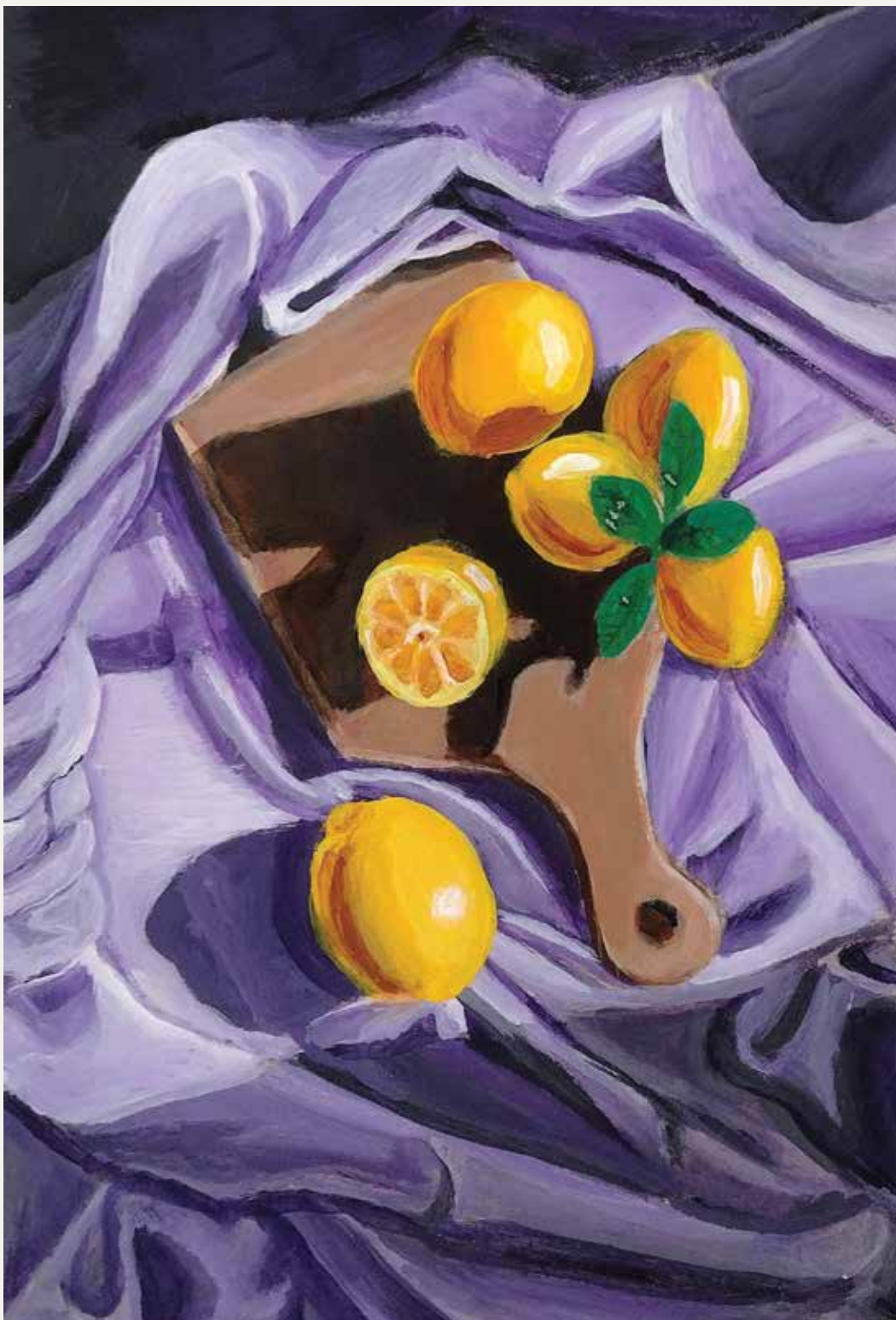
Oliver R. Smith

Ice crawls up the walls of the fence.
Waves fall down,
Waves of bones.
The clock on the ceiling, way up there,
Ticks backwards.
The copper man doesn't wear a crown
Of thorns.

And my coworker whispers words
Under his breath, when I ask him,
"Why are you doing bad?"
"Abogado." (Lawyer)
About how he works two full-time jobs,
About how his mom is in the hospital,
In Guatemala, and they don't know what's wrong.
About how he is two months sober,
From his haunting holdover addiction.

And on my way home after closing,
The car radio turns on, as always,
101.7 FM, it's on the Spanish channel.
And through the waves of static
That everyone gathers around, separately,
"No pueden entrar a mi casa."
(They can't enter my house.)

But to the true ones, they'll keep their doors
Wide, wide open.
To the visitors, the ones that trek,
To the ones who take up everything
That the newly-lain bedrock won't,
To the ones who try to speak new tongues,
To the ones living in fear now,
The ones who came from fear.



When Life Gives Ya Lemons Sabrina Rahman

My SOS-Dishwasher

Jiajing Chen

Opening the aging, faded, and worn wooden door of my house, I walk into the compact kitchen. A sparkling clean, lemon-scented freshness drifts out to greet me. As my gaze moves forward to the cracked and chipped white countertop, a shining silver stainless steel dishwasher nestles among the dingy, grubby pomelo-yellow wooden cabinets.

Even though dishwashers aren't a common household appliance in China, and my parents-in-law exhibited shaking heads with frowns at the idea of purchasing one, I took a deep breath and took you home because I just couldn't get you out of my mind after you had already proven to me your value at my workplace.

I still vividly remember your first day on the job, fizzing and bubbling out of your chilled mouth because I mistakenly used dish soap. That moment made me panic like a new parent when my baby got sick for the first time. It was chaotic, unforgettable, and the beginning of our journey together.

As a Chinese household, our cooking methods such as frying, stir-frying, deep-frying, and stewing demand a lot of ingredients and oil. From morning to night and day by day, nothing is more important than cooking an ever-changing menu: bloody spicy fish, golden crispy fried pork by the scoop, steaming juicy soup dumplings, sauteed tender shredded chicken, crunchy tossed jellyfish with cucumber, and marinated bran dough with peanuts and black fungus.

While drowning in the kitchen chaos, a mountain of greasy pans, sticky plates, fussy chopsticks, and sauce-smearred cookware feels like a tornado of food has blown through my counters. Then, by load-and-point, everything finds its place.

Tableware is set from top to bottom: chopsticks and ladles rest on the top rack, deep bowls and crystal glass cups nestle in the middle, and shallow plates and rusty pots stand firmly on the bottom.

You've become my comrade. When I'm facing the challenge of a big meal, you cue me that I'm not alone with your whoosh-whoosh. Your 24-hour standby and 0% strike rate in the kitchen bring me comfort. You're my caregiver. While I sleep, you take on a battle of your own, wielding your three yellow powerful spray arms to wipe out the chaos. You're also my health protector, guarding my family from hazardous bacteria and viruses with your 160°F temperature drying system.

You've rescued me from the buzz of scrubbing, family bickering over whose turn it is to wash, and the heartbreak of seeing bright stainless steel or gauzy glass turn dull and rough. You hum gently in the kitchen, reminding me that even if the sink is overflowing with a towering pile of pungent dishes, I have a dependable friend ready to help. You never display grumpiness, no matter how heavy the load or how stinky the science experiment growing in a forgotten container.

I'm so grateful for having you by my side in the kitchen, and for your consistency, your quiet strength, and the message you always share with me. You always fulfill your responsibilities consistently and fix the chaos caused by others who simply comply without acting. You remind me to be a useful person and someone who helps others, brings light to those around them, and illuminates the world. You are a real role model through your diligent actions, cuing me to be a person who shines by helping others, rather than someone who only seeks to be illuminated.

**You hum gently in the kitchen,
reminding me that even if
the sink is overflowing with
a towering pile of pungent dishes,
I have a dependable friend
ready to help.**

The Decision

Charles “Keith” David

The sound of the C130H aircraft was deafening as we walked to the open ramp of the aircraft. The smell of JP8 aviation fuel triggered memories of previous airborne operations. Some good memories, some not so good. As we stood at the base of the ramp waiting for the loadmaster to give us the signal to board, my mind drifted back to my daughter and our recent conversation.

I had recently returned from a deployment to the Middle East. Sitting in my chair, I could hear the tick, tick, tick of my clock. To me, it was the comforting sound of being home. I must have been staring at the clock, deep in thought, when I heard my daughter.

“Daddy, what are you doing?” she asked.

“Thinking, Nikki, just thinking,” I replied.

“Daddy, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course you can, Nikki,” I replied.

“Daddy, what are you going to do when you grow up?” she asked.

I sat there. Floored. I did not know how to respond. I was deep into my military career, but not near retirement, but she had a point. What was I going to do when it was time to make the decision for the next step?

“Daddy, I am tired of you always being gone. You missed my dance recital and birthday this year,” she said with tears gently rolling down her cheeks.

Knowing that my deployments had an effect on my family was one thing; seeing the tear-stained face before me, an image that would stick with me forever, was when I truly realized how hard it was for my family, not knowing if I would come home from the next deployment.

“I know, Nikki,” I said with a slight tremble in my voice, “I know.” As she crawled up into my

lap, I held my eight-year-old daughter with tears running down my cheek. I was glad she could not see my face.

As the loadmaster gave us the signal, we boarded the aircraft. It was a warm and humid night. The sky: clear and starlit. It was going to be a good jump. The jumpmaster gave us the command to don our helmets once we were seated and buckled in. As we settled in for the flight, I drifted back to my thoughts. What was I going to do? Did I want to retire or keep going in the Army? I looked around in the warm glow of the cabin lighting and looked at my teammates. They were getting comfortable — if that was even possible. Soon, some would be sleeping or lost in their own thoughts. It still amazed me how we could sleep before a jump.

As we neared the drop zone, the jumpmaster stood up at the rear of the aircraft just in front of the ramp, turned, and faced us.

“20 minutes!”

We ensured everyone was awake and ready to go, making final checks of our gear and, for the 10th time, confirming that all was as it should be.

“10 minutes!”

The red jump light was activated. My thoughts on my decision, however, still crowded my mind. What do I want to do for the rest of my life?

“Wind speed – 2 knots!”

“Stand up!”

As we stood up, I checked my gear, then I checked the pins in the flap on the back of my

“Daddy, what are you going to do when you grow up?” she asked.

teammate, Tim. As the ramp was lowered, dirt and dust flew around the back of the aircraft. Everyone was alert and prepared.

“Move to the rear!”

We started moving to the edge of the ramp. This time, it felt different. Almost like I was cutting the tie that had kept me stable for almost the last 15 years. We were near the edge of the ramp — waiting for the next command.

"Stand by!"

We gave a thumbs-up. The soft glow of the chemlights on our gear gave the back of the aircraft a surreal, green glow. Looking out the open rear of the aircraft was like looking into the abyss — dark, black, foreboding. Again, my mind drifted. My future seemed as blank and

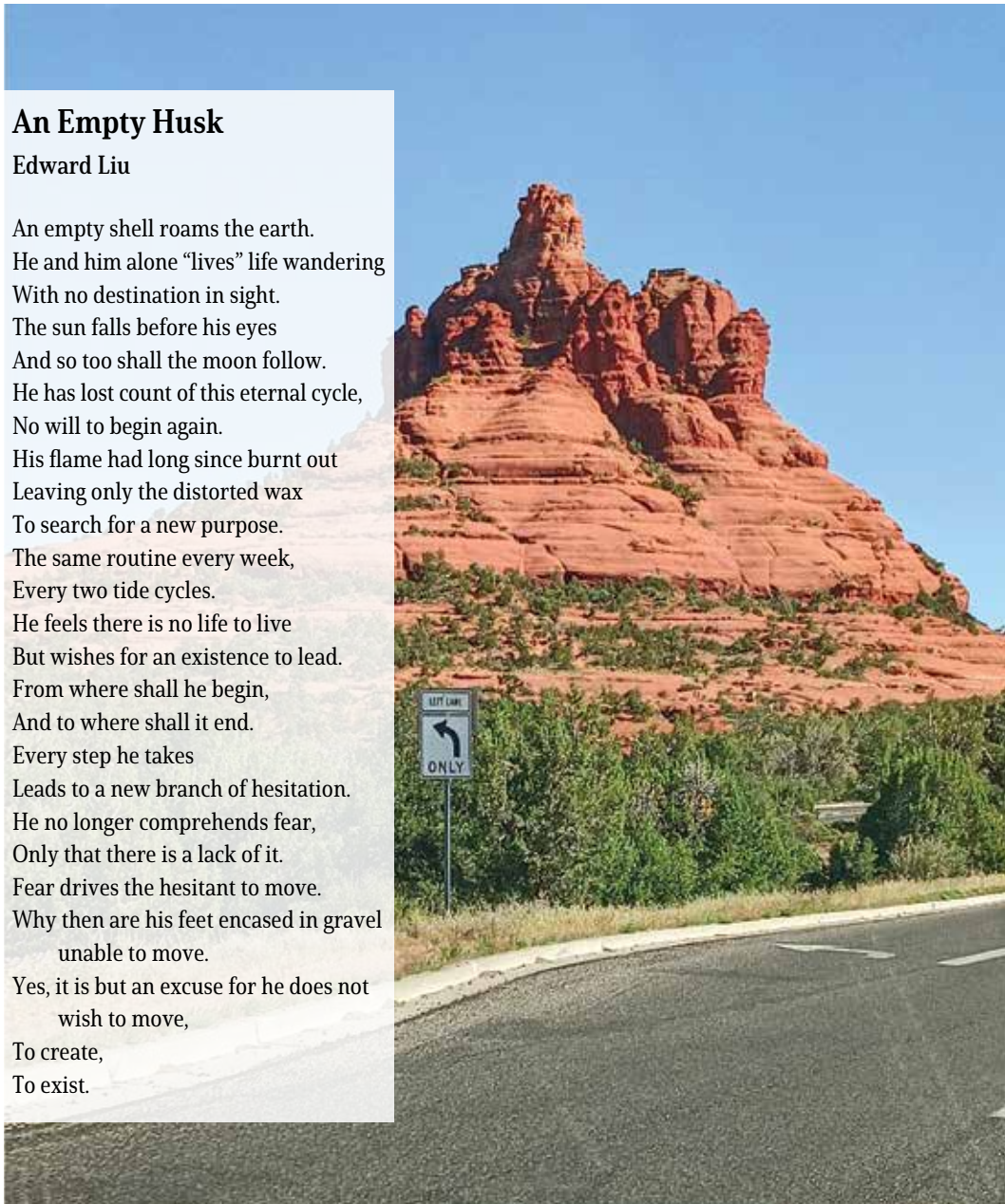
mysterious as the night was dark. I was scared ... not of the jump, but of the future. Do I stay past 20 years or retire? If I do stay, I will miss so much more of my family and the crucial moments that come with being together. What do I want to do? The jump light flashed from red to green.

"Go."

An Empty Husk

Edward Liu

An empty shell roams the earth.
He and him alone "lives" life wandering
With no destination in sight.
The sun falls before his eyes
And so too shall the moon follow.
He has lost count of this eternal cycle,
No will to begin again.
His flame had long since burnt out
Leaving only the distorted wax
To search for a new purpose.
The same routine every week,
Every two tide cycles.
He feels there is no life to live
But wishes for an existence to lead.
From where shall he begin,
And to where shall it end.
Every step he takes
Leads to a new branch of hesitation.
He no longer comprehends fear,
Only that there is a lack of it.
Fear drives the hesitant to move.
Why then are his feet encased in gravel
unable to move.
Yes, it is but an excuse for he does not
wish to move,
To create,
To exist.



No Right Turn Karen Stepherson



Extra Credit Rebecca Archer

Demon of the Deep

Ethan M. Armstrong

As I fell, the Leviathan that had been following me
Vanished.

No worries, just pain, no more responsibility.

Weeks off of work, and all the time to myself.

This is what I want,

Right?

Credit card, insurance, eating out too much.

Groceries, car payments, too many subscriptions.

Lying to the love of my life that I'm alright.

The Leviathan circles, once possible to escape

Now it churns the water to push me in.

Friends' success and pleasures smeared in my face.

My resentment reflected back to myself.

Second, third, and fourth application rejected.

The sweet taste of freedom turned into shackles

Just chums the water for the serpent to come again.

The thought of living was as appealing as a dog's breath.

New Year's resolutions in April sprang from my lips.

Of how I will be better

Try harder,

Yet all from a snake's mouth.

Still trapped in my room, its shrill shriek grows louder.

It lunges for my throat.

Teeth sinking in.

Echo

Susan Mardele

Books, ah, books.

You are a savior, a source of peace, an escape.

You open doors, windows, ideas and possibilities.

You expose other cultures, alien ways of thinking

You give a glance inside the workings
of a different mind.

You help us understand the “other,”
and bestow the realization that there is no “other.”
There is only we.

You reveal the inside thoughts of other people.
Otherwise, each person thinks in monologue.

The reader may agree or disagree,
but the important thing is the conversation,
writer with reader.

A book takes you anywhere in the world.

Lets you meet anyone
from the cozy nest of a bed or sofa.

But there is more to books
than a convenient escape.

Books are the voices of all of us
memorialized in paper and ink.

They are the expression of those long gone
or the musings of those present and breathing.

They embody our collective soul,
preserving it past any individual's death.
They are a record of who we are.

Books are a freedom that can change a life.
They are at once an inspired revelation
and a dire warning.

The idea of banning books is chilling.
It cuts off a finger, a foot, an arm of all of us.
Eventually, with enough amputation,
there is nothing left,

Just the echo, echo, echo of a single thought.
But isn't that the point of banning books?



The Baphrog Lounger Maria Carrillo

Reflection

Elizabeth Moore

She stands in front of the mirror
Staring at the face in front of her
The resemblance is stark to my own reflection,
Yet she is so far away,
So distant

Her eyes are tired
And her expression cold
She holds fear that is deeper
Than what can be seen on the surface

She appears lost and afraid
To show what she really wants,
Or how she really feels

She's hiding something

Others' expectations come crashing down
A pressure that feels as through
A wave has crashed over her,
But her cries are unable to be heard

She knows that how she feels is normal,
Only temporary
But isn't a lifetime
Only temporary?

Oh, how this lifetime weighs down
On her,
The pressure everlasting

But when the pressure subsides,
The release is freeing,
The weight lifted like a
Head above water
After a crashed wave

She looks in the mirror,
Her eyes are glossy,
Her expression warm

Whatever lies
In the journey ahead,
She knows she's done
The hardest part:
Accepting herself

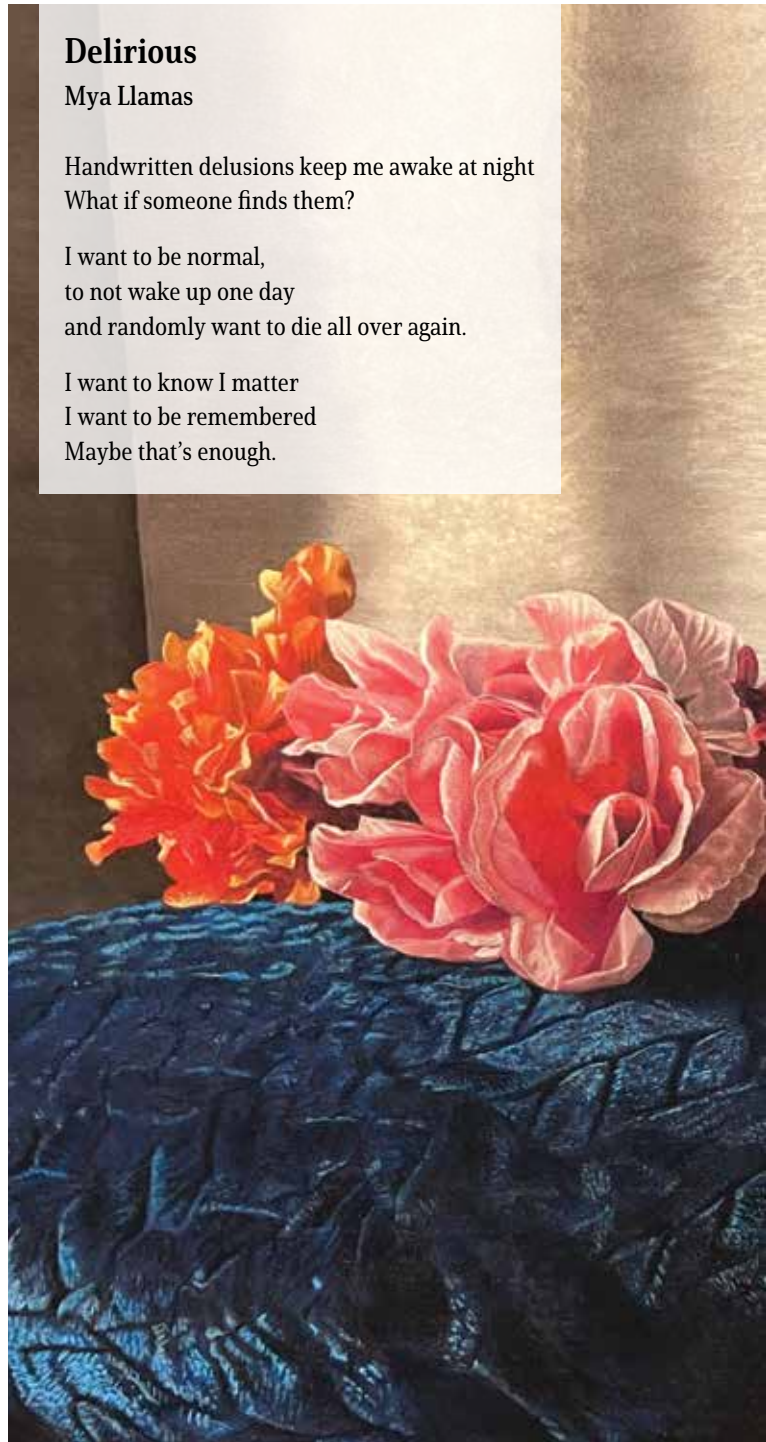
Delirious

Mya Llamas

Handwritten delusions keep me awake at night
What if someone finds them?

I want to be normal,
to not wake up one day
and randomly want to die all over again.

I want to know I matter
I want to be remembered
Maybe that's enough.





Lukewarm Episodes Numa Nazeem



A March Morning

Barkha Sejwal

A smile plastered
My eyes bright
Listening to your white lies
Sometimes I get the urge to fight
But I just sit, as if all is fine
Used to be birds of a feather
Now we talk about the weather
Whispers, gone
Laughter, gone
My heart sinks
We don't sync
It was a March morning, that you changed
Since then, we have been estranged

Natural Affection Christopher Munchmeyer

Summertime

Veronica Green

Cool breeze and
the Sun pounds me
Down, down
down

Crush my bones
These tired things
I want to hear the sound

Of change
Of reformation
I'll measure by the bound

In my head
There will be silence
My spirit free, unwound

My two feet planted
Life on Earth
Exploring solid ground

I'll do anything
to keep at bay
the demons
I have drowned

In waters clear
In waters blue
Clarity is
profound

Cool breeze and
the Sun pounds me
Down, down
down

I want to stay forever
In this summertime
I have found

My Childhood

Abdullah M. Abubakar

Echoing laughter, autumn colours,
and my mother's smiling, beautiful face

When my mother used to find me hiding behind the guava tree.
When she carried me on her back on the stairs when I was half asleep.
When my dad used to buy me toys just so he could bring a smile to my face.
When my sister and I used to make noise around the house playing with each other.

But being a child, I wanted to do grown-up things.
After growing up, I realized that those were the days

when my smile was always real and my shoulders always light.
When I was free of the chaos that wreaks havoc in my mind.
I grew up.
My parents' hair started to turn gray.
My younger sister, no longer a toddler.

I'm up next in the driving seat.
I can never bring back my childhood, but it lives in me.
I couldn't have asked for a better one.

So long, partner!



Texas Sunset in October Clay Anderson

I Held A Dying Thing In My Arms

Kealy S. Mayton

I still smell her body on mine after a shower-
I'll still wear that hoodie despite the blood-
My throat is still sore from screaming-
And I still shun the neighbors for knocking.

We curled up for the last time on the kitchen floor,
After I lured out the monster and shut the door.
She was limp and silent- could've been asleep.
But I know about the pain. She was acting just for me.

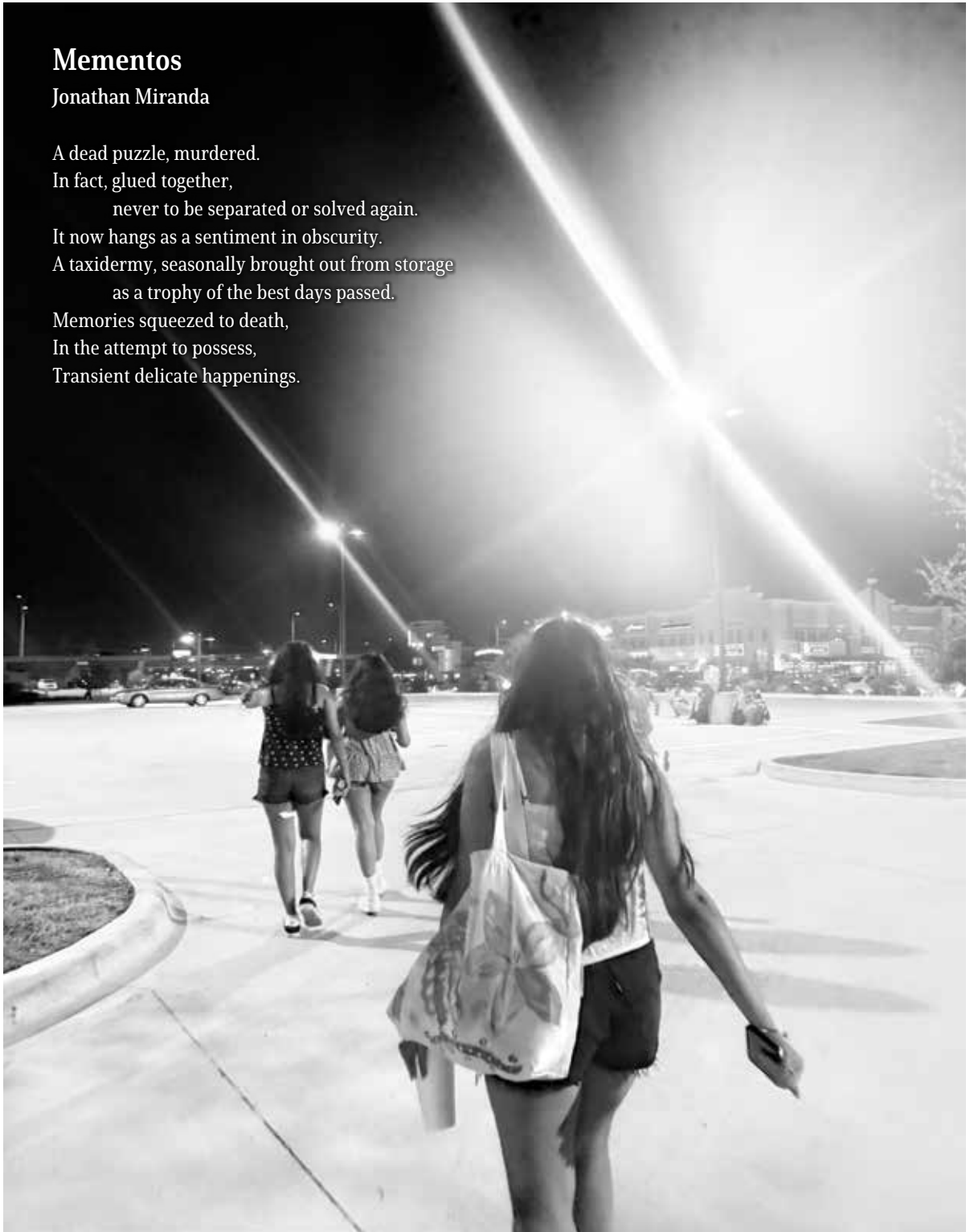
My fight or flight stretched out
Over hers to see the light of day again
As it led me to her grave.
It wrung me out slowly,
Pushed me past my 1 p.m. where I
Said all the right things, smiled at the right times
With dirt still stuck under my acrylics.
Further and further away from her.
My bones still ache from digging, but
My clothes don't smell like her anymore.
I stopped seeing her body being
dragged around by the neck when I close my eyes.

Someone saved my work boots from the rain
It's lost to me now. I can go through this again.

Mementos

Jonathan Miranda

A dead puzzle, murdered.
In fact, glued together,
 never to be separated or solved again.
It now hangs as a sentiment in obscurity.
A taxidermy, seasonally brought out from storage
 as a trophy of the best days passed.
Memories squeezed to death,
In the attempt to possess,
Transient delicate happenings.





Burnt Orange Sky Jessika Hughes

The Room Corner: A Kind of Loneliness

Chengcheng Tian

My room is not very original — just a quiet, still place that makes me feel peaceful, but also a little empty for me, like the room feels it, too. It does not have much furniture, and my single bed in the corner it is like a slice of pizza in a 10 inch pizza box — it belongs here but does not fit in. I always have a feeling that my room is isolating my bed and me. Whenever I wake up, I feel the gap between me and the wall, the cold blue wall gives the room a formal, serious vibe. I feel the judgment from the room toward my bed and me; the high wall looks down on me from above like a Supreme Court judge, but the fear hides in the dark when I turn off the lights.

I put the black movable storage basket beside my bed as my bedside table. There is a small lamp in the basket, and it has a JBL speaker right next to it. I always watch movies on Netflix at night with the speaker on. I lie on my bed with the lamp glowing softly, the orange light shining on my single bed and me like a warm spotlight from a lighthouse in the vast sea at night. Just like the ending of the movie, I'm on a small boat, covered by the vast dark blue, with danger hiding in the dark, until the orange light reaches me, I feel a quiet kind of peace instead of the loneliness.

The Man in the Corner

Nick Adair

There's a man in the corner
He is the color of the walls
There's no one there, my family says
But he is

His face is empty
His eyes are like tunnels, sucking you in
His hair is like tendrils of thin, black rope

His clothes are smoky
As if he'd just stepped out of a burning pit
They suck the light from the room, darker, darker

Darker

And then he speaks

His voice is like nails on a chalkboard
A dying animal
Every painful sound rolled into one
But what he says is worst of all

Stop
Give up
If I can't help you, who can?
You might as well quit now

No! I shout
I don't need you
You don't matter to me
I showed up today, so if you won't, then fine

And then I turn on the light
And the man is gone.

Let Us

David Drane

Come,
Let us be friends.
Over broken bread
Let us make amends,
A foundation set in stone,
A bond without end.
Let us wrestle with love,
Let us tussle with truth,
While we exchange thoughts and ideas
As true friends do.
Let us make a connection without infection,
An honest bridge,
A delightful one,
A bridge of respect
Over borders, flesh, or tongues.
A bit of friction,
Tinctures of give and take,
Friction, yet not for friction's sake,
Devoid of jealousy, lies, and hate,
May we feast with only truth and love on our plates.
Let us empty our plates,
Satiated, not nauseated,
To the end, my friend.

The Little Red Coat

Halie L. McCandless

This short story is a fantasy about time travel and getting a second chance to know a loved one a bit more, especially from a different, mysterious perspective.

This town has nothing to offer anymore. I sigh and walk into one of the two hotels in the Gilmore County area. I found my room and took in my space. The bed sheets were sticky and filmy. As I pulled back the scratchy comforter, a mascara stain streaked one side of the blanket. I winced and put it down.

“Why did I even come back here?” I sighed to myself. The air conditioning unit coughed to life, and here I am. The travel fares to go back to Indiana were quite expensive for one little airport. I checked my phone for the time, and it read 4:05 p.m.. Not quite dinnertime. Maybe I’ll give Mamaw a call. I put the phone on the bed and scratched my head, glancing over at the black sweater I hung up. Wiping my tears, it dawned on me that her funeral was this afternoon. My grandmother was not doing well after her accident, and the medication she was on made it difficult to even keep her head up. She would fall asleep during the middle of a sentence.

Then, the AC unit hummed until its hums whispered and clanked to a stop. I hauled my purse over my shoulder and took a few items to shop at the only supermarket within the next 10 miles. *I’ve missed home.* A red sleeve with plaid stitching peeked out of the closet. I narrowed my brows. It must have slipped my mind. When my uncle picked me up from the small-town airport, he gave me this jacket, saying it belonged to my grandmother. When I picked up the coat, it seemed polished. It almost looked brand new, and I swiped it off its hanger. Once I put it on, a rush of fluttering excitement washed through me almost as if I was speeding down a rollercoaster. I checked the mirror, and I reached for a handle. Then, a rush of heeled footsteps and several shades

of suede passed by on a busy street. I stepped through the full-length mirror into the 1960s.

Beehives and loose curls bobbed through the streets. The girls gabbed on the street, holding a newspaper and gushing over The Beatles on a magazine. My face beamed, and I felt a grin, and I swiped just a bit and a fuchsia print swiped across my finger. The only thing I could do was check around for the mirror. Disappeared. Nowhere. Gone. It must have disappeared, and I had no idea what I was going to do, or how I could survive wearing heels on concrete.

A young adult woman appeared and jumped up and down, “Going to the bonfire tonight? Genni is even bringing some beers. Her parents are out of town.”

I stopped to scan her for a moment, and the girl was waiting for an answer.

“Oh, um, yes.”

“Oh, Melanie. I know you have a test tomorrow, but you don’t have to be such a square.” I remember hearing these names, and I think my grandma, Genevieve, even talked about a good friend named Melanie. She used to tell me she was aloof and funny like I am. The girl smiled and gave me a hug, then she quickened her pace with her books. It was getting dark outside as the sunset faded into the clouds. A chill ran through me, and I shivered.

Once I put it on, a rush of fluttering excitement washed through me almost as if I was speeding down a rollercoaster.

I saw myself in a reflection in the mirror. I was wearing the same coat, only it had no stretchy or faded material. It was brand new.

I felt inside the pocket, and a note read, “I have so much to tell you, Hannah.” Someone knew I was here.



Exhilaration Gilbert Hu

My Child Is Off

Ethan M. Armstrong

My love, my soul, my inspiration
That's what makes my children.
My pride and thoughtfulness
That's what shapes my children.
But they aren't ready.

Now one wishes to brave the world.
To brave the ridicule and hatred that comes with life.
To prove that they can be great.
But I've become too protective.
Too restrictive.

They're off to find themselves.
But what am I to do? Watch as they crumble?
How am I to let go and stop protecting
I don't think I taught them everything, yet
Come back you mustn't go yet



Cloud Painting

Sabrina Rahman

Glossing my brush on the delicate sheen
of a cloud's ephemeral azure daze.
It's safer indulging this canvas gleam —
romance sculpted in a gossamer haze,
Boucher's cherubs lounge in sugared meringue.

Compare that to the real experience:
not predictable dandelion fluff,
But harrowed hailstorms, moody maelstroms, deaths
in deluge. Or ... a dewy dawn above,
Cole's verdant landscapes — that sylvan morning.



Painted Skies Charlie S. Tuzzolino

Silver Linings

Seema Endley

If life was just a bed of roses,
How dull it would then be!
I may not have known my strength,
And what it takes to be.... Me!
Stumbling blocks did slow my speed,
On a trip of tedious miles....
But with every teardrop I was blessed,
With a million happy smiles!
Challenges have to be met,
Decisions can go wrong!
Do your best with a smile on your lips,
And in your heart, a song!

Let go of people, and of thoughts,
That tend to pull you down.
Remember things that make you smile,
Not things that that make you frown.
No matter how bleak things may seem,
There will be an end to pain.
The sun's brightness will fill the sky,
After days of clouds and rain.
So, count your blessings, thank your friends,
And cherish the ones you love....
And as you bravely forge your path,
He will send you strength from above!



A Quiet Thought in Yosemite Emanuel Santos Bacordo

On Ice

Susan Mardele

When the world ices over,
I burrow in, warm and cocooned.

At first cozy and thankful,
restlessness sets in after a day or two.

Venturing out carefully,
stepping gingerly over sheets of ice
coating streets and sidewalks,

I tread on the front lawns
for enough traction to walk normally.

It is there, audible, the quiet,
almost a force pressing in.

The constant freeway noise is gone,
and only a few brave souls drive by.

It is unfamiliar, this absence of sound,
but I could get used to it.

As the ice inevitably turns to slush,
then to water,

The engine of the usual
will splutter back to life,

And with it will come the ambient sounds
of hundreds of thousands of people

Driving, talking, hollering, breathing,
working, loving, and laughing.

Until another day like today
when life is on ice,

Exposing our deafening daily noise
by its absence.



Vintage Beauty Jayna Burch

Dots

Nick Adair

A black wall is covered by little dots
Blue, brown, green, and white
Each dot has a story, a history
A treasure trove of memories
Each preserved within a circle of plastic

These dots have seen the world
From sun to snow, deserts to mountains
These dots have seen long plane rides
And longer car rides
They've seen tears, both of joy and of grief
They've seen our hearts, and brought us closer

How magical is it that they hold our pictures up?

The Untranslatables

Sabrina Rahman

Year round, words will travel to countries overseas,
But many find their tourist visas were denied.
Usually when foreign interpretations fail
To host equivalents — they're passport stamped, defined
as the *Untranslatables*.

In Italy's trattorias, you will dine with
"Abbiocco," to describe that pleasant drowsiness
After a hearty pasta carbonara plate
Parmesan and olive oil imbibed sleepiness
wine drunk on peach Moscato.

In Russia, you'll peruse through Nabokov's novels
Of the "toska" genre: unbearable despair
Mental anguish, the bleak melancholic hoarfrost
Weeping vodka sorrow on the grieving, austere,
iced Siberian tundra.

In Germany, you'll laugh over "schadenfreude."
Revel, rejoice at the misfortune and troubles
Of others. Cruel, yes, but foreigners do perceive
The country's wit and humor as sardonic, droll,
dry like a Helles lager.

In Japan, you'll witness fleeting "komorebi,"
Ephemeral haiku of sun spilling sake
Through sakura trees. It's the brief flicker,
A glimmer of spring's hopes and petals as the day
rises on Fuji's summit.

In America, we really need a term
Reflecting our uniquely brazen bravado.
Delusional Gadsden grandeur. That unearned
Self-assured swagger of a rugged rodeo
cowboy — that sort of whiskey
manifest audacity.

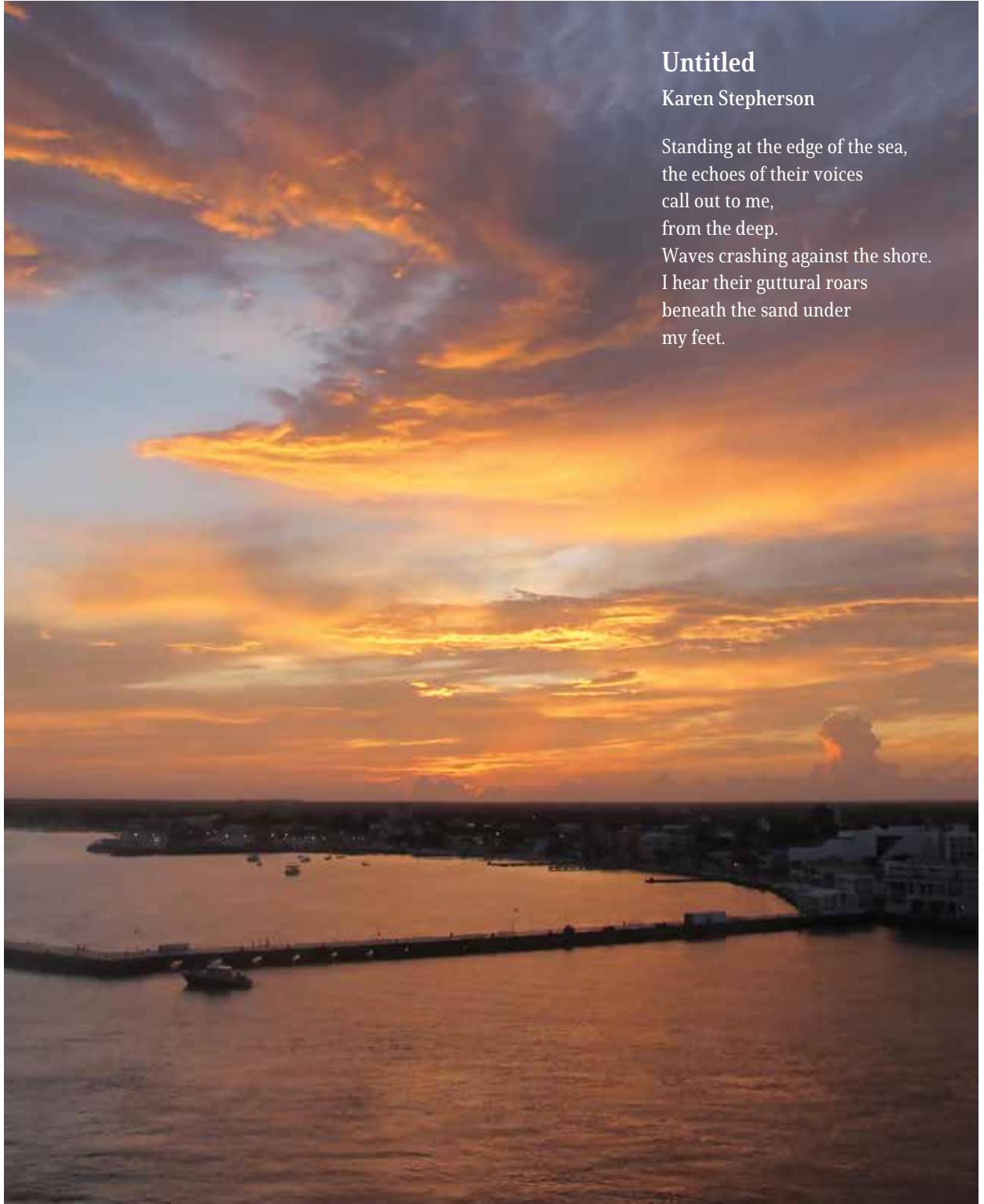


Cowboy's Jump rope Katherine E. Coronado

Untitled

Karen Stepherson

Standing at the edge of the sea,
the echoes of their voices
call out to me,
from the deep.
Waves crashing against the shore.
I hear their guttural roars
beneath the sand under
my feet.



Views from the Ship Jessika Hughes

An ode to the unseen

Billy Smith

- I. A Black boy, learning his own queer name,
Felt a silence, a familiar shame —
A weight, a shape that did not fit,
The world insisting he must submit.
He learned the cost of being seen,
A space between, a constant in-between.
But in that void, a purpose grew:
To build a world that spoke the truth.
- II. For representation is not a screen,
A fleeting, distant, pixelated dream.
It is a breath, a hand, a face,
A living, breathing, sacred space.
It is the permission that you grant
To a fragile heart, a doubting chant.
To say, “I’m here, and so are you,”
To make the abstract vision true.
- III. I recall a boy, all quiet grace,
I saw my former self in his face.
He whispered, “I didn’t know it was okay
To be like you, to live this way.”

And in that breath, a flicker, bright —
A seed of hope in muted light.
I was the mirror I had lacked,
Reflecting a future, whole, intact.

- IV. So I show up. I take the chair.
I help to serve. I learn to care.
In senate halls and shelters’ doors,
I fight for overlooked and ignored.
Not with a roar, but with a stay —
A constant proof, day after day.
A testament that we belong,
A lifeline, steadfast, deep, and strong.
- V. Let the world be slow to change its art,
I’ll be the blueprint of my heart.
The role model I had to find,
For the next quiet, brilliant mind.
So let this presence be my creed,
A living root, a planted seed.
For every youth who feels alone,
They are the future, fully known.



Red Among Green Bernadette Dozier



Carnation Pink Sabrina Rahman

Being a Writer

Jessika Hughes

The point of being a writer is hating to write. It's the feeling of wanting to have something to write about so badly that you just avoid it all together. You are unnoticed until you become noteworthy. Before then, you're just a nobody typing away at a computer in a coffee shop. You wake up early with a concept for the best novel ever, but you can't even get a sentence on the page. Letters fly from your fingers slower than the rate of the return button. A racing mind is an idle body. Closed eyes are not just sleep; they are moments when the consciousness wanders to other worlds. Early morning and late nights are interrupted; "Did you take the trash out?" she calls. "I'll get it in a minute, I'm writing," you respond. The trash never gets taken out, so she resents you for the rest of the day. You close the computer and have to get *real* work done at the place that pays your bills. Weeks go by then months, and the unfinished manuscript remains just that. You open Google, "How do you write good poetry?" *Write as much as you can*, it responds. That doesn't seem to be working. "What are the chances of getting published by the Big 5?" *1%*. Even if you try to convince yourself, you are mostly likely a part of the 99%. You try a smaller scale. School magazine. Rejected. Community poetry contest. Rejected. Scholarships for writers. *Didn't pass the*

first round. You try a broader search. Too young. *Rejected*. Too old. *Rejected*. Past publications? No? *Rejected*. You silence your email notifications to avoid the disappointment. You find yourself there again. Laptop on your desk. Fingers poised on the keys. For someone who hates writing, you find yourself there a lot. In silence, the words flow like rivers splitting into 10 different streams. Until your hands ache, you turn thoughts into words. With surprise, you realize that you don't care if anyone will ever read it. You would sacrifice the eyes of a million people hounding your work in favor of those hours when silence and stories become your only moments of peace.

Flowers That Sell

Ava G. Santillan

Everyone fights for the roses and tulips
I stand in line for daisies and orchids
It's draining to compete for the easy bouquet
The one that perfects any dining room table

I see wilted colors from behind the cart
Someone picks up petals of jade vine
Trampled black bat, drying lantanas
Columbine looking through me

I chose the flowers that sell
The high demand, the profitable bunch
Causing hidden gems to remain unknown
Contributing to their lack of care

My bouquet is white and pink
It matches with any furniture; complements the drapes

Yet the blue, black, and multi-colored allures me
In another life, maybe they were mine

Question Marks

Mirabelle D. Wolfe

We were sitting in the sticky July sun,
Our backs branded by the cruel chessboard of the chain link
Marking us the only two fanatics in our lovers' cult
Our legs were woven together as if we were trying to survive a snowstorm
And I think we could have

I was examining your left forearm
Like *vein, freckle, muscle* were the answers to any question
But then I saw
Something I hadn't before
And because when I am with you pain is but the shyest of ravens
My tone was foolish feathers when I asked
What the ghostly needles were



Lemons Sydney A. Sheldon

You made no answer so
I looked up at you, I
looked.
up.
at.
you,
my pathetic lime-slice eyes
Mere garnish on the rims
of your deep Coca-Cola ones and,
as earnest as a senile old man,
I asked you
Again.

Oh
I will
Never
Recover
From the beam of agony that reflected
Off the diamond line set in your lips
That for each of my sunrises,
I will try to melt away.

How could I expect self-destruction from my everything?

Cave Painters

Marcus Tsai

When I told Ma I didn't want to go to law school anymore, her eyes widened like a river and she reached for the big wok hanging above the stove.

"Steamed fish tonight," she said, turning the burner to high.

"Scallions in the fridge. Start chopping."

I shook my head. "Ma, we don't have to cook. Let's just talk." But she had already ripped the cod from its plastic packaging. Her gray hair wagged at me as she sliced the filet in half, her fingers grazing its flesh to check for wayward bones.

"No time to talk," she said. "We cook first."

"Ma." I reached around her and turned off the burner. She scoffed, batting my hand away. "If you don't want fish, then say so," she said.

"Ma. I don't want dinner right now. I want to talk."

She swiveled on me, sniffing as if my decision had a scent. The fish's clear oil varnished her fingers. At 60, her hands were the only part of her that remained smooth, moisturized by decades spent handling the wet muscle and fat of processed animals. I considered how similar they were to my hands, how our skin tones matched, how our joints met at identical angles. There was only one difference. Fifteen years ago, when I was 10, I thought that I would one day inherit Ma's restaurant. Ma had made it clear that my career choices were limited — it was the restaurant or law, or something equally as dreadful. So, I practiced my knife skills daily, until one afternoon when the knife slipped — and sliced straight through the tip of my left thumb. Blood doused the cutting board. Upon hearing my wails, Ma rushed into the kitchen.

"Méi shì, méi shì," she kept saying. *It's nothing, it's nothing.* But it wasn't nothing. As she bandaged my hand, I watched her fingers move with singular precision. They were sure of their place in the world, where to be and when. They were fully intact. I knew, even then, that I had lost something. Maybe I never had it to begin with.

"Anna!" Ma snapped her fingers at me. I realized I was standing in the middle of the kitchen, my hands curling into fists.

"Pay attention," Ma continued. "Last year, you come to me, saying this nonsense. Then, we have dinner, and you change your mind. We are having dinner soon."

"Ma, I never changed my mind." I took a deep breath, trying to relax my shoulders. "And I'm not changing my mind now. I've found something better for me."

Ma cocked her head. "Medical school?"



The Koi Between the Trees Katherine Huang

"What? Ma, no." I reached into my pocket and handed her the acceptance letter I'd printed.

"A master's program in art history," I explained. "Remember last year, when I told you I like art? I can study it for a living."

Ma sputtered. "So you want to become a *painter*? Forget it." She shoved the paper into my chest. "I make dinner. Set the table if you want to be useful."

"Ma —"

"No! Dinner first."

She swept away from me. In seconds, the flame was at a tantrum, and the faucet hissed as she filled the wok with water. Instead of setting the table, I backed out of the room. I eased the creases from my acceptance letter and flattened it against a window. Ma had left a fish oil handprint on the paper, which blurred the *Congratulations* and turned the ink translucent. I could see our backyard through the words, its lone oak tree and dying flowers. If only Ma could see through me, too. No need for explanations, no maze of rebuttals. I placed my hand over her handprint and pushed the paper against the window, leaning on it with so much force that my fingers turned white. I gritted my teeth. "*Cueva de las Manos*," I thought in an attempt to calm myself down. *Lascaux, Sulawesi, El Castillo*. Thousands and thousands of years ago, ancient humans pressed their hands into the walls of caves, hoping to leave an impression on the world. Now, these locations brim with evidence of their communities, their lives, their desire to be understood. *Look at me*, the handprints seem to say. *Remember me*.

I rubbed Ma's handprint with my thumb. Even after the accident, my hand slotted perfectly into its outline. I glanced over my shoulder — Ma was chopping vegetables with fervor, humming softly to herself. If only I could see through her, too. Instead, all I had was this handprint. I wondered — if she were an ancient human, if she had pressed her palm into the wall of a cave, would I be able to identify it?

I knew the answer. Yes, and instantly. Her handprint would cross from one millennium to the next, and I would find it, and I would recognize it. I would decode the pigments and the rock and the positions of her fingers. What was she saying? How much would I understand?

I stepped back into the kitchen. Ma didn't turn around, but her shoulders tensed, and she shifted to give me access to the wok. Silently, I picked up the cod and rested it on top of a steaming rack. I waited for Ma to adorn the fish with sliced scallions and ginger before securing it an inch above the water.



Life in Unexpected Conditions Leilani Lau

"Twelve minutes," Ma said.

"I know, Ma."

I reached for the cooking wine to start making the sauce. But Ma grabbed my hand. She brought it to her chest. Her eyes drifted down to our fingers, our touching palms.

"Anna," she said. "Anna."

"What?"

But she didn't say anything else. I let her hold me until perhaps I was the one holding her. The entire time, she stroked the scar on my thumb, so gently, back and forth, back and forth.

Crow

Chase Greer

Tink, screeek... Tink, screeek...

I can't move too fast or my leg will slip off. Useless thing broke again. Third time this season. At least that scrap wire behind the smithy should hold till I get home. Slowly. Always slowly. The slower I move, the longer their eyes linger. You can cut the judgment with a knife.

Whispers follow me through Ashvale's cobbled streets. My artificial foot clacking against the stone; the tarnished and bent hook I use in place of my right hand glints in the sun.

"He was a thief, and the Warden took his hand and leg."

"No, no — he was warming the wrong hearth."

"Well, I don't know why we have to look at him. He makes me feel dirty."

They think my ears don't work. I keep my head down, hair in my face, and limp onward.

A guardsman calls, "Hold!" as a Crown Coach clatters past toward the Warden's Keep. The crowd hushes, straining for a glimpse of royalty. I snort. If they knew just how small the distance between the crown and the gutter really is, they'd choke on their awe.

Ashvale's still my home, though. Born here, broke here, patched up like my shed.

By the time I reach it — a sagging shack with more holes than boards — I'm ready to collapse. My "workbench" is an upside-down crate. My stool, a log. I set to fixing my leg, wrapping fresh wire around the splintered knee strap.

My first prosthetic was a healer's crutch cut in half. Worthless in rain. Over the years I've scavenged parts — rags, rods, and, best of all, the little wooden shoe forms I found behind the cobbler's shop. With just a few screws and tension

wire I was able to attach two to the front of my stump and one to the back. It ain't pretty, but it keeps me standing. Usually.

I test the repair and lean back — then freeze. Something's off. My tin. Gone.

I tear through the shed, heart hammering. Who'd steal from me? I basically got nothing, why would they take the one thing I got? Then I see it: footprints. Small ones. Children.

"Of course," I mutter, following the trail behind the cottages until laughter leads me to an empty lot.

"Can't believe you did it, Mitchell! Ol' man Crow's gonna kill you."

Crow? I blink, looking down at my patched-together leg and oversized black coat. I then turn to look at my footprints. First time through a child's eyes ... yeah, it does look like a bird's foot.

"Here's the deal: you'll do what I say, or I'm gonna tell the Crow who took his treasure."

Bullies. I hate bullies.

I pull my coat over my shoulders, hood up, arms tucked to make my sleeves look like wings. I drag my hook along the stone wall — screeek — and step into view.

"Hey!" My voice rasps low. "Don't move."

They freeze. I limp closer, slow and heavy. "You." I nod at the ruffian who was talking. "Give the boy the tin."

He starts to pass it, but drops it.

"Let's try that again." I try not to over do it. "Pick it up, and hand it to Mitchell."

The small one trembles as he takes it.

"Now," turning my attention to Mitchell, "stand behind me."

He obeys, eyes wide.

I turn back and glare at the bully, "If I ever see you messin' with little ones again, I'll come for ya. My crows see everything. You hear me?"

He stares, pale and shaking.

"I said, understood?"

"Yes Mr. Crow, I mean, sorry. Yes sir!"

"Good. Now, one more thing," I drop my head... then whip it up, hair flying. "CAW!"

He screams and scatters like leaves.

Mitchel stays frozen. Poor kid looks like he wants to vanish. I lower my hood and hold out my hand. "Hand it over."

He gives me the tin.

"This wasn't yours. You know that, right?"

"Yes, sir. J'onn made me, sir. Said I had to if I wanted to play with them. I'm sorry, sir. I really am. I won't do it again, I swears!"

"Kid, you don't want friends like that. They

drag you down. You go and help your family instead. Deal?"

"Yes, sir. Anything."

"And tell the others to quit messin' with — what do you kids call me? Old Man Crow."

He nods hard, then hesitates. "Sir... do you really talk to crows?"

I smirk. "Get on home, kid."

When he's gone, I limp back to my shed. The evening's weight presses me onto the stool. I set the tin on the crate and open it. Inside, a single ribbon with the Royal Guard's sigil. On the back, scratched into a plate of metal:

Thank you for your service.

A crow lands on the fence outside, head tilted, watching me.

"Yeah," I mutter. "You're welcome."

It lets out a single, hoarse *caw*.



Lost in Freedom Adewale Kolawole



Nature is the Beauty of the World Nishita Balamurali



Fragments
Jodi Pena

Endurance

Samantha Boie

Houston advised Chrissy to look at things from a different perspective. She should focus on the fact that she was still alive. She still had a life waiting for her back on Earth.

She was grateful that they were quiet all day. Though there were millions of miles between the *Endurance* and Houston, they monitored her so persistently that sometimes she regretted being that close. The chirps of incoming messages from Houston had become so intense in the past two weeks that Chrissy could still hear them in her head. She jumped at every sound that echoed through the ship and glanced at a nearby screen to confirm that there were no new messages. She knew they would say something eventually, and she worried that the impending “Are you done yet?” might tip her over the edge.

She knew NASA had a room full of people tracking her bio stats who probably had a heart attack each time they saw her heart rate rise. It was no small deal for them to grant her this silence.

Chrissy sat alone at the cold metal table that used to be the crew’s communal area. Having a dedicated place for gathering as a team was imperative for preventing feelings of isolation.

That was a nice time. When her feelings mattered.

She fought the urge to tap on the screen that protruded from the wall to her right. It was usually where her focus lived, in the software and code. That was her job.

She wasn’t sure she could handle seeing her orders again.

Chrissy would obey them, despite her abhorrence, but she could only let it occupy so much of her mind before it became unbearable.

Though she would never admit it to their psychologists, during her last conversation with Houston, she seriously debated throwing herself out of the airlock.

What stopped her was the suits.

Her hand had hesitated over one of the bars on the door that separated the *Endurance* from the void of space as her eyes wandered over the suits that used to protect the rest of her crew.

She felt ashamed when she looked at those suits. While she could never forget that she was now alone, they reminded her that there had



Lava Cactus of the Galapagos
Deborah Cardenas

once been a whole team. There were people whom she loved and respected who used to occupy those suits, and they had loved and respected her enough to sacrifice their lives for her. Throwing herself out of the airlock would waste their sacrifice. She couldn't do that to them.

So she went back inside and starved herself for as long as she could in protest of the orders she knew she would have to follow.

Chrissy desperately wished that she had been any of them.

Maybe if she had been an engineer like Cooper, she could have found a way to fix the CO2 scrubber.

Maybe if she had been more pragmatic like Commander Collins, she could have handled being the only remaining crew member.

Maybe if she had been more experienced in space walks like Dr. Taylor, she could have scavenged for any of their supplies that were drifting in the debris behind the *Endurance*.

Maybe if she had been a biologist like Walker, she could have found a way to keep them from starving.

Maybe if she had been any of them, she could have been worth saving. In the end, she was designated to be the sole survivor because she was the smallest.

Standing at five feet, two inches and weighing 105 pounds, she was 30 pounds lighter than Commander Collins. The rest of the crew were all average-sized men who would need significantly more calories to survive, and with the CO2 scrubber limping along, they couldn't even guarantee that the life support systems could keep one person alive.

Chrissy needed less food, less water, less oxygen, less everything. The decision had been made with simple facts by the people back on Earth, and it had been supported by the crew members who would pay the price.

Chrissy had no say in the matter.

The rest of the crew apparently knew within hours of the flare. They kept Chrissy in the dark until the time had come for Dr. Taylor to tell her how to preserve the bodies and exactly what cuts to make. They didn't want her to freak out exactly like she did.

Set Drive Score
Camryn R. Fredrickson



She lashed out when Commander Collins told her. By then, it had been a week since the flare, and they had exhausted their options. There were no clever solutions that could save the whole crew, and the longer they tried to find one, the lower the chances for survival were.

Dr. Taylor sedated Chrissy after one too many threats to kill herself first. When she woke up, she was the only one left.

She had two options. Either she died and wasted the sacrifice of her friends, or she lived.

And in order to live, she had to betray her own humanity.

She could blame it on her orders and avoid the word for the rest of her life to try to absolve herself of any accountability for what she was about to do, but it was her choice, really. She

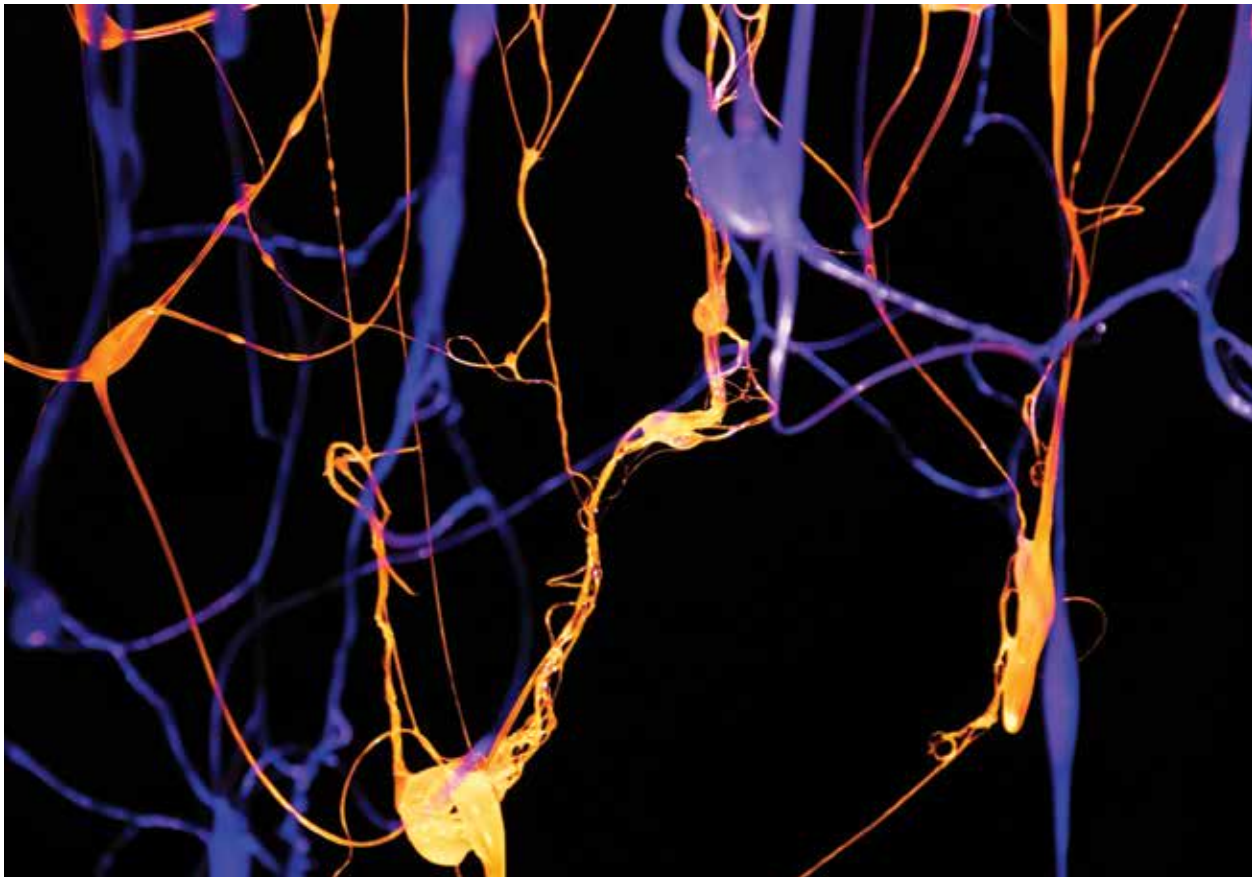
chose to bring herself back in from the airlock. She chose to follow Dr. Taylor's instructions.

She chose to survive.

The meds Dr. Taylor set aside for this were taking effect. She no longer felt like her heart was about to give out, and instead, her body was telling her that everything was okay. Every muscle relaxed, betraying the reality of the situation. It was impossible to tell if the dizziness was from hunger or from the diazepam, but it helped. She doubted anyone would say anything about the fact that she took a little more than she technically needed to.

She took a deep breath, lifted the fork to her mouth, and ate the strip of meat from Dr. Taylor's arm.

Lost Macey Loureiro





The Unsaid Jordan Bradberry

Are You an Organ Donor?

Nia Dillard

I've always been a perfectly law-abiding citizen. I pay my taxes, I volunteer, I round up my change, that sort of thing. I've never understood what could cause a man to choose the path of crime. In all honesty, I've always looked down on criminals, petty crime, theft, murder, it didn't matter to me. They were all the same, depraved and irredeemable. That was until I finally understood what could send a man off the ledge. I have a daughter, Cora. She's six years old and my absolute pride and joy. She's an angel. Never talks back, always brushes her teeth, teacher's pet, that sort of thing. And today, I'm sitting in a cold, sterile room as a cardiac specialist tells me my daughter has a congenital heart defect and needs a new heart, that she won't live more than six months without one. His words after that washed over my head entirely as I wondered how the hell I'm going to get her a new heart. He explains that there's a list, that we have to wait for enough unfortunate souls to die before my daughter can get a chance to live. So fine, whatever, I can wait around for car crashes, slip and falls, and freak accidents. Or, I could take matters into my own hands. I cut off the doctor and left. I didn't need to know what place my daughter was in line; I just had to get enough hearts for her to be at the top.

So there I was, both hands on the wheel, staring straight ahead at the horde of cyclists in the road. I don't know why I'm so nervous; no one even likes cyclists. But I am, I'm nervous to mow down dozens of unsuspecting people to move my daughter up the list. But just like the college student in the Mini Cooper, the landscaper cleaning the gutters, and the teacher who forgot to look both ways, I'm doing what has to be done. For every life I take, someone else gets another chance. A fresh set of lungs for a smoker, and new liver for an alcoholic, and eventually a new heart for my daughter. Every ambulance I hear, every time I turn on the news, all I can think of is that pager, the one the hospital is going to use to tell me my daughter doesn't have to die. That someone got their plug pulled, and it's time for them to stick their heart in my daughter. It hasn't come yet, and all I have are calls from her doctors about making arrangements, making her comfortable. My machine is starting to get full.



Lux in Tenebris Ava Dinh

And I know what you're thinking, that I'm a bad person, I'm selfish, evil, that sort of thing. But really, it's not my fault. No one made them register to be organ donors. If only they knew how easy it was to get that information, track them down, and force them to make good on their promise. They get to be a hero, immortal, larger than life. No one can ever utter a bad word about them. They'll be on the news, they'll have a balloon release, maybe a park bench. In a way, I'm doing them and their families a service. I'm erasing all the bad things

they've ever done. In fact, I'm sure they'd thank me, if any of them had lived, of course.

I'm getting closer to the top of the list, I can feel it. It's a miracle no one has caught me. I've always been careful to cover my tracks, but you can never be too sure. Of course, I plan to turn myself in once my daughter has her heart, but until then, I just need to move up the line little by little every day. I can see she's getting worse; she's fading away. I keep telling her to have hope, that I'm going to save her. I wonder what she'll think of

me when she's older. Will I still be her white knight, or will she see me as a monster? I don't have the luxury to speculate.

Today, Cora collapsed. She just stood up from the couch and fell to the floor. I rushed her to the hospital, preparing for the worst. They put her on life support; they said her heart isn't strong enough to support her. The doctors just don't understand how close I am, how the sacrifices I made are finally about to pay off. They told me she's next in line for a heart. They usually don't see the line move this fast, but it's been a year of miracles. But there's no way to know when the next heart will be available. It could be hours, days, or weeks. Time she doesn't have. I know she can't afford to wait, and I refuse to lose my daughter. So, I said goodbye to her and went out one last time. Ten minutes later, you could hear the sirens rushing in my direction, and in Cora's room, her pager finally buzzed.

The Rift Between
Abigail R. Garcia



Out of the Charmed Circle

Josiah Sanchez

He sent the chauffeur home.

Today was the day.

As he drove to his lunch meeting, Will Hartley gripped the steering wheel with an unusual force.

It had been a while since he had seen Emily, not since the Crash definitely.

Giving his car to the valet, Will wondered if they would give it back when they discovered he couldn't pay.

Once in the restaurant, Will scanned the tables to see if he had come late. No, he was early.

The dining room beyond the reservation desk was both familiar and totally foreign.

Memories of eating here with his family as a young boy came flooding back to him.

The maitre d' was the son of the man who had worked there most of Will's childhood.

Lucky him. Still has a job. Will thought ruefully.

Finally, the double doors of the entrance swung open and in stepped Emily Carlton.

"Em," he said with a smile, and they hugged. "Lovely as ever."

"You too. You've lost weight," she said, eyes flitting over his suit in the customary price appraisal sort of way that Will had gotten used to but still made him fidget with his fingers.

Appraisal over, Emily walked to the reservations list, pointed and said in a loud voice.

"Our usual table."

With her back turned, Will breathed a sigh of relief. So it was true. A jag and a well-cut suit *could* hide a multitude of faults.

After they had sat down, ordered, and ate for a moment, Emily said, "I'll cover it this time," leaned across the table and whispered, "I wonder if they'll take my credit card. I've had to get one under a new name."

Her laugh was bright, but Will knew her well enough to see what no one else would: Emily Carlton had no money. All her investments had been tied up in a shell company that ceased to exist after the Crash, he knew this well enough because he had been the one to convince her to put them there. It had seemed a good bet at the time.

The dress and coat may fool many, but Will saw that they were from three years prior, a practice she had proudly denounced to all her friends.

Will chuckled at the joke as if it was normal conversation over lunch.

They ate for a while. Will was careful not to look as if he hadn't eaten for a month. While Emily held to her standards and ate a salad and water with unwavering poise.

He took a deep breath and was about to speak when she began talking again.

"Will. You won't believe what happened to me on the drive over here. My driver slowed for a yellow light, silly I know, but I guess he was just being cautious. Anyway, at the light there was one of those people on the side of the road," she gestured as if looking for the right word

"Unfortunates," Will offered.

"Beggars, that's it," she said, as if that was a better phrase. "There was a beggar there asking for money. I'm very altruistic, but times," she took a sip of water.

Will nodded, saving her the indignity.

"So, I look down at my phone when something hits me. That man looks just like James from school. You remember."

Will's heart sank. He, James, and Emily had once been close during their college days but slowly fell out of touch. It was uncomfortable to think of him living the way she said he was.

"I rolled down my window, I had to know for sure, and said 'James, is that you?' He looked at me and I knew instantly it was."

Will shook his head sadly, so it was true.

"I was going to say more but the light was green and my driver went on before I could stop him."

"I can't believe it," Will said. "Poor James. I need to go find him and try and help. Maybe you could loan him one of your cards."

Emily looked at him as if his statement's meaning was lost on her. "Poor me. I've been using my friendship with him to get more credit. Now I'll have to find someone else."

Will felt as if he had just fallen into icy water. They had been friends in school but now what? Take away the money and all that mattered to her was keeping up her credit.

If he had any doubts, this erased them all.

He would go today.

"By the way," Emily's words cut into his thoughts. "You're still *good* aren't you?"

Will shook his head in disbelief. "Em," he said louder now, "I've had to steal food from my neighbor's porch to get enough to eat for the past month. I still don't know how they haven't taken my house."

Leaving behind Emily's shocked face, Will stood up and walked out.

The valet approached him nervously.

"About your car, sir," he said staring down at the ground.

"Yes?" Will asked, while guessing at the answer.

"Well, sir. They've taken it, sir."

With a smile and nod Will said, "I guess I'll have to walk."

Looking around, he crossed the street and pulled out a crumpled flyer from the breast pocket of his suit jacket. On the front were printed the words: Food Bank. All are Welcome.

For the first time in a while, Will looked around, and started walking.

Cruising Legacy West Ann Tilger



Swansong

Kacie Packer

Reginald began to stir sleepily as traces of morning light streamed across the bedroom. As his eyes fluttered open, they landed on the rocking chair in the corner of the room, which they had been doing each morning for a number of weeks now. There, a soft rocking could be heard, and in the chair, his dear Dolores. “Good morning, Reggie. How did you sleep, my love?” her voice sweetly cooed. “Never more soundly, knowing you would be here when I woke,” said Reggie, turning to raise himself off the pillow. Sitting up, he pushed back their handmade quilt and turned his body to face hers. “They got here quite early, didn’t they?” she said, surveying the bedroom door, where the sounds of breakfast dishes could be heard clattering in the kitchen.

Just then, the door began to creak ever so slightly, and Reggie saw the crisp blue eyes of his daughter, Annetta, peering into the room. “Oh, Daddy, I’m sorry! Did we wake you?” Opening the door, she moved to sit next to him on the bed and placed her hand gently on his. “It’s a lovely day. For October, anyway. The sun is shining, and not a cloud in the sky. A good way to ring in your hundredth year, huh?” Reggie studied her, joy evident with her childlike smile still visible beneath her adult features. Annetta’s face momentarily turned toward the rocking chair, eyeing the antique intently. “Be sure to give Mom my love, ok?” she said, squeezing both of his hands tightly. “Breakfast is put together — extra-crispy bacon, of course — so when you’re ready, come down, ok?” She gave him a wink and left him to get dressed.

Cello
Gracie J. Boniedot

“Did you tell her?” Dolores asked, cocking her head to one side. “You know I could never keep a secret, D,” Reggie said, shyly smiling in her direction. “Besides, what’s the use in hiding our conversations? It would only worry her if she thought I was talking to myself.” What he hadn’t told Annetta, or his son, Marty, was that he had begun to feel a strange pull from the great beyond. The veil that separated life and death had become perceptible in the weeks leading up to his birthday, and their mother had gone from a voice in his head to a visible apparition. Dolores never left her chair, but each time he woke to her presence, she felt more real, and he felt less



connected to his mortal coil. An uneasiness about leaving his loved ones behind had seeped into his mind, casting doubt on his readiness to join Dolores on the other side.

Reginald dressed methodically: khaki pants, a plain T-shirt with a red flannel, topped with a Dodgers baseball cap — his fall uniform. He opened his door to head to the kitchen, the alluring smell of bacon beckoning him. He turned to look back at the rocking chair, now a bare cushion bathed in morning light. For the first time, he had a strange sense that Dolores would be returning sooner rather than later.

Reggie meandered down the hallway leading to the kitchen, gingerly fingering the pictures on the walls — vacations, recitals, wedding photos, and baby pictures, stretching as far as the eye could see. He and Dolores had curated a miniature museum right in their home, one he sometimes took for granted. Rounding the corner into the kitchen, he was awestruck to see not just his daughter, son, and their families, but also more friends and extended family than he had seen in decades — a cacophony of laughter and love. His granddaughter, May, raced toward him, wrapping him in a firm hug. Behind her, the many adored guests cheered in a joyous chorus, “SURPRISE!” She gently eased him back and grinned eagerly, “Now, that is the face we were looking for! I knew we could pull it off.” Reggie felt his breath catch in his throat, and with his worn, velvet hands, wiped tears from his eyes. He looked at the familiar faces, and he could feel his cup fill in a way it hadn’t in the many years since Dolores’ passing. May guided him toward the living room, where tables and chairs had been set up. His son brought out his breakfast plate, piled high with his favorites: scrambled eggs, freshly baked sourdough with strawberry jam, and, of course, extra-crispy bacon. Marty bent down to kiss him on the cheek. “Happy birthday, Dad,” he said, beaming. As they ate, friends and family took turns sharing stories and jokes; at the center of it all was Reggie, and the imprint he had left on their lives. Each shared memory cleared the

doubt clouding Reggie’s mind, and he began to realize that no matter where he was, he would always be with them.

As the celebration ended and the guests began to leave, an overwhelming sense of peace washed over him. Each farewell hug and kiss felt like the period at the end of the long sentence that was his life. How one man could be so lucky was beyond his comprehension, but he was at a point in his story where he no longer needed to know why.

Tucking in for bed that evening, Dolores kept watch over him, just as he had expected. Facing her, Reggie took a deep breath and said, “I think that they are ready, and so am I. There is nothing left unsaid, and no matter where I am, I will be with them, just as you have been with me. This remarkable day was my swansong.” For the first time, Dolores rose from the rocking chair, walking softly across the wooden floor, closing the distance between them. When she arrived at the edge of the bed, Reggie was already closing his eyes as his breathing slowed. A content smile spread across his face as Dolores tenderly reached to take his outstretched hand. “I love you, my dearest, Reginald,” she said, “and I’ll see you soon.”

Galapagos Saddleback Tortoise
Deborah Cardenas





